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Nassir al-Sayeid al-Nour

Islamic Anticlericalism Manifesto

In this controversial book (manifesto), the Libyan thinker and linguist Dr. Monem Mahjoub addresses thorny issues about the theology of Islam.

Mahjoub employs both historical and epistemological methodology to explore the dilemma of flawed Islamic theology. His approach calls into question the validity of using sacred texts of Islam as the sole foundation for Islamic religion, faith and belief. In corroborating his conclusions, he points to the compromises and historical developments that have caused beliefs to diverge over vast geographical areas.

Mahjoub insists that the right way to study and understand Islam is from a critical perspective. In contrast, since the sixth century, theologians have taken for granted that Islam is God's literal message through his Prophet Mohammed for the whole world.

Rarely has criticism entered into Islamic ideas, regardless of the attempts by many schools of thought to interpret Islamic philosophy as derived from Greek philosophy and theology (logos). Indeed, traditional theology has wavered between rationally interpreting Islam and vehemently rejecting it. Later on, this would have a crucial impact in shaping the prevailing view of Islam in theory and practice.

What's new in Mahjoub's interpretation that differs from interpretations by his contemporaries?

The entire manifesto is written chiefly from a single interpretation, which is confusing because the manifesto is neither a rhetorical statement nor a light study paper on its subject. So what is it?

The book divides its topic into fifteen parts of long prose pieces. The word "manifesto" in the title is a little confusing because it evokes the sense of a political discourse akin to some de facto institution like a political party rather than the logos of critical epistemology. However, this approach seems justified by the author's methodical undermining of the stockpile of theology about the Islamic heritage.

The critique of orthodox Islam is a juxtaposition of modernism and traditionalism. In terms of historical evaluation, it is derived from some oriental approaches that unearthed different trajectories of thought from Islamic history. In the beginning of the 20th century, the conflict between



Manifesto against Islamc priesthood



Monem Mahjoub

fundamentalists and liberals within Arabic and Islamic intellectuals erupted into what has been called the Arabic Renaissance. However, the manifesto, by labeling as orthodox the conventional interpretation of Islam, thrusts the study of Islam as religion and belief into the realm of comparative religions.

To be sure, the term orthodoxy is multifaceted. It originated in Christianity yet is used by many different religions. The author argues that by orthodox Islam he means the stagnant traditions that persist in Islam as a Semitic religion in a socio-historical Arab context.

Islam, the author concludes, is the authentic reference point in the Arabic world view, while orthodox Islam includes the unthinkable part, the core meta-history of faith. That’s why he has abandoned Islamic theology, which he considers to be a loosely woven and insignificant concept. In addition, orthodox Islam shares the blame for spreading the radical and violent Islamic movements, which fought fiercely the more tolerant reform attempts throughout Islamic history. It also shares the blame for empowering its followers with unshakable and provocative discourse.

Mahjoub defines his terms, which is crucial, because he means something very specific when he says “Orthodox Islam.” As a linguist, he clings fiercely to his use of analytical terms and the articulation of their inner mechanisms through language. This is proven in his tour de force work, “Pre-existence of Language,” a book that placed his research among the most advanced discoveries in the realm of languages, particularly the family

of Semitic languages. In common practice, language has played a crucial role in Islamic theological debates.

The sacred mission of the Quran was completed once Allah revealed its last verse to his messenger. From that point on, nothing beyond the Quran's authoritative text could be taken as fact.

Arab efforts to interpret the Quran evolved into rhetorical praising, which led to a singular way of reading and thinking about the Quran. Thus, approaching the sacred text (Quran) by any other critical, semiological, anthropological or literary methodology became impossible.

Mahjoub asserts that the Muslims had no documented authority for their beliefs, so they adopted the Quranas Islam's total discourse. Moreover, the Quran has become a metric by which all knowledge and science are judged, measured and valued. It is considered to be a system of life. To many scholars and political leaders, Islam is no longer just a religion, but a political model for governing state and life.

Likewise, other secular and Muslim scholars, often referred to by the author, tried to figure out what traditional Islamic theology uneasily shared wither form efforts led by both moderate Muslim scholars and free thinkers. To this end, Mahjoub revisited the era of the Abbasid Caliphate. Now ended, this was the formative cultural period when a massive drive in science and translation was injected into Islamic thought. Since then, clerics and authoritarian absolute rulers of the Islamic World have established a new alliance. This alliance is a version of the political decree still imposed in this modern era. It depicts the relation between rulers and their Muslim subjects.

In his long manifesto, Mahjoub tries to identify the genesis of Islamic thought within the context of philosophical and epistemological criticism. It is a compelling study based on a highly intellectual interpretation of the hidden mechanism rooted in the heritage of Islamic theology.

Alexander A. Onwumere & Florence Egbulonu

The Influence of Negritude Movement on Modern African Literature and Writers

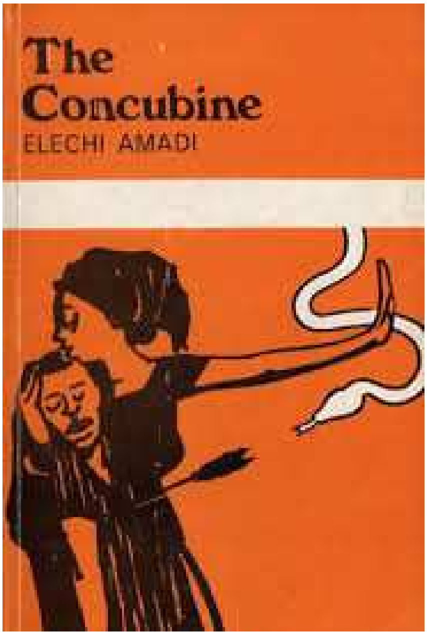
A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*

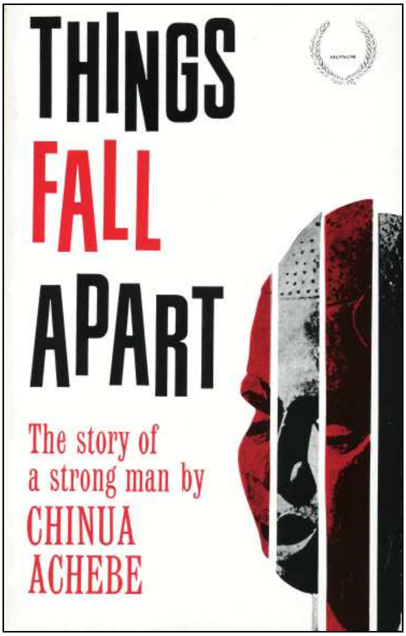
Introduction

Negritude is a literary movement of the 1930s to 1950s that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation. The Negritude movement was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, a literary and artistic flowering that emerged among a group of black thinkers and artists, especially poets and novelists, in the United States, in New York in 1920s.

The Harlem renaissance is associated with such writers and poets as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Claude McKay. They are intellectuals who fled to France to escape racism and segregation in the United States. It was, however, Claude McKay, a Jamaica-born poet and novelist and a prominent voice of the Harlem group, who caught the attention of Senghor. He believed that a writer should deal with important political subjects, and he himself had much to say about institutionalized racism. He projected his ideas and hatred against racism in his masterpiece and picaresque novel, Banjo, which centres on black seamen in Marseilles and is notable in part for its portrayal of French treatment of black colonials. Senghor read McKay's Banjo and became highly inspired to begin his movement.

Basically, Negritude movement is born out of the context of francophone Africans who were responding to stiff, dehumanizing, and cultural and religious disorienting policy of French assimilation. Assimilation is a term used to describe the French colonial policy in Africa. The policy was aimed at turning Africans into 'Frenchmen' through the process of education. The French educational policy in Africa was thus meant to make the Africans culturally French. Quoting P.C. Lloyd, Egudu states that 'to make this policy attractive to Africans, the French proclaimed that Africans could assimilate French culture and that those who did so could be accepted on terms of full social equality by all Frenchmen' (30). The social equality was, however, never realistic. Importantly, 'assimilation was not aimed at elevating the African but at devaluing his culture, and that was why it was thought





necessary to strip him of his true cultural self and put on him a foreign one which he was later to revolt against' (Egudu, 30).

The assertion of black pride by members of the Negritude movement was attended by a cry against this assimilation. They felt that although it was theoretically based on a belief in universal equality, it still assumed the superiority of European culture and civilization over that of Africa (or assumed that African has no history and culture). They were also disturbed by the World Wars, in which they saw their countrymen not only dying for a cause that was not theirs but being treated as inferiors on the battlefield. They became increasingly aware, through their study of history of the suffering and humiliation of black people; first under the bondage of slavery and then under colonial rule. These views inspired many of the basic ideas behind Negritude. First, the mystic warmth of African life, gaining strength from its closeness to nature and its constant contact with ancestors, should be constantly placed in proper perspective against the materialism of Western culture. Second, Africans must look to their own cultural heritage to determine the values and traditions that are most useful in the modern world. Third, committed writers should use African subject matter and poetic traditions and should excite a desire for political freedom. Fourth, Negritude itself encompasses the whole of African cultural, economic, social and political values. Fifth, the values and dignity of African traditions and

peoples must be asserted. Lewis Nkosi's quotation of what Cesaire told the Haitian poet Rene Despestre during the Havana cultural congress in 1967 is worth reproducing in full here:

> We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we develop an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are, that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains cultural elements of great value, and that Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations (97).

Negritude movement was thus borne out of the context of the above quotation. Against slave trade, colonialism, neocolonialism and above all, prejudices towards the black race and black people. Three young Africans in Diaspora, particularly in Paris, namely Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Aime Cesaire of Martinique and Leon Damas of Guyana cried out. But, before the assertion and subsequent establishment of the African historical relevance, her heritage and values, the Negroes had to undress themselves of the shackles and constrictive tendencies of assimilation. Oladele tells us of Cesaire's postulation,

> To set our own and effective revolution, we had to first put off our borrowed dresses, those of assimilation and affirm our being, that is negritude, to be truly ourselves, we ought to embody the negro-African culture in the realities of the twentieth century for our negritude to be effective an instrument of liberation… we had to shake off the dust and assert it in the internal movement of the contemporary world(45).

Negritude Movement and Ideology

The triumvirate, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Leon-Gontran Damas and Aime Cesaire founded the Negritude movement. The troika theorized Negritude around the ideology of unified liberation. The term 'negritude' means 'blackness'. Cesaire coined it from pejorative French word, negre. Cesaire boldly and proudly incorporated this derogatory term into the name of an ideological movement, and used it for the first time in writing of his seminal poetic work, *Cashier d'un retour all pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Native land). The original concept of Negritude is 'rooted in the specificity and unity of black people as historically derived from the transatlantic slave trade and their plight in New World plantation system' (Kesteloot 36). In the words of Cesaire, 'Negritude is not cephalic index or plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering' (8). Ideologically, it is therefore,

> The simple recognition of the fact that one is black, the acceptance of this fact and of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture (Senghor 10).

Cesaire’s response to the centuries-old alienation of blacks via negritude movement is a call to reject assimilation and reclaim their own racial heritage and qualities. He experiences his negritude as a fact, a revolt, and the acceptance of responsibilities for the destiny of his race. He advocates the emergence of ’cultural workers’ who will reveal black specificity to the world bybarticulating their experiences, their fortunes and misfortunes. It is only the black that will write about their history and validate their achievements. This will restore the lost humility, dignity, integrity, and subjectivity of black identity necessary to confront Colonialism, racism and Western imperialism. Cesaire rejects assimilation and ideologically articulates,

> My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day, my negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth’s death eye, my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral, it takes root in the flesh of the soil, it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky (58).

Damas (1937) in his *Pigment* provides an ideological perspectives. For him, negritude is a categorical rejection of an assimilation that negated black spontaneity as well as a defence for his condition as a black and a Guyanese. In his poem, ‘Limbe’, Damas articulates negritude,

> Give me black, my black dolls
>
> So that I may play with them
>
> The naïve genius of my instinct in the darkness
>
> Of its laws, once I have recovered
>
> My courage and audacity and
>
> Become myself once more (39)

Senghor conceptualized negritude as that which promotes a quest for the authentic self, knowledge of self, and a discovery of African beliefs, values, institutions and civilization. Negritude implies the rehabilitation of the black man, the affirmation of African personality. Negritude, Senghor asserts,

> Is the consciousness of being black, the simple recognition of the fact, implying acceptance and responsibility of one’s destiny as a black man, one’s history and one’s culture. It is the refusal to assimilate, to see oneself in the ‘other’. Refusal of the other is affirmation of the self.

It is not only the trios Peres, the troika-founders of negritude that have

offered ideological perspectives of negritude but also other African critics and advocates of negritude have provided theoretical framework . For instance, Egudu looks at it from a more panoramic and metaphysical view,

> As a concept, negritude means the black man's 'being' in its cultural, spiritual, psychological and physical aspects, it is based on racial consciousness, though not racist, and it has political emancipation as one of its aims, though it is not a political concept (35).

Julio sees negritude as simply 'a process of social emancipation' (47). Lewis Nkosi refers to it as,

> A movement of political revolt against the tyranny of western culture over those who were colonized by Europe; as an attempt to restore pride and dignity to those demanded of either hope or racial identity…. Negritude was primarily a movement of political reactions (80).

Dathorne contends that 'negritude meant a nostalgic glance to the African past and; as a corollary to this, a denunciation of all that was wrong with French colonial endeavour' (243). In all, negritude is unbridled desire and concerted effort towards psychological, physical, religious, cultural, political and any other form of liberation and empowerment.

Criticisms against Negritude Movement

Many African authors and critics seem not to have been in favour with negritude movement and its ideological perspectives. NonAfrican and African critics attack negritude on the ground of its 'irrelevance' and extremities. John-Paul Sartre in the preface to Senghor's Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache calls negritude an 'anti-racist racism' (4). Rene Menil, a Marxist philosopher and co-founder of Martinique Review, Tropiques, considered Negritude as 'a form of exoticism and selfconsciousness sustaining French imperialism'. Kesteloot credited negritude with the 'birth of French Caribbean literature' as well as critiqued its fetishization of blackness and identity politics. Edward writes that 'Senghor's existentialist definition of negritude was challenged by African scholars and philosophers such as Marcien Towa, Stanilas Adotevi and Paulin Hountondji' (23). Other African literary critics like Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Dathorne have challenged not only the approach but also the content and excesses of negritude. Wole Soyinka views negritude as reinforcing colonial ideology, a stance that automatically places black intellectuals on the defensive. For Soyinka 'a tiger does not proclaim its tigerritude, it jumps on its prey' (22). Lewis Nkosi writes that 'one sees in these [negritude poems] literary ideology which may be as crippling to young writers as the high-handed dictates of a cultural

commissar in communist countries' (88). Ezekiel Mphahlele considers it as 'sheer romanticism, often it is mawkish and strikes a pose' (56).

Importantly, Negritudism is not all about negativism as projected above. Other African literary critics have seen it in a positive light. Egudu has cautioned that,

> In discussing negritude in Africa poetry, one should be guided by what the founders have pointed out as its elements: the value of the civilization of the African world. And these 'values' are to be found in the African culture, the African human person, the African world view, and the African spirit of humanity (35).

This caution is imperative because ideologies like negritude and Pan-African movements seem to be 'unifying bond of Africanity' (Karen, 35), which was broken as a result of Atlantic slave trade and the African colonial experience. It is in this light that Irele asserts that,

> Negritude and black intellectuals represent an extensive exploration of black condition in both historical setting and in its direction towards an ultimate significance (68).

Dathorne does not see any reason why Negritudism should be dismissed as irrelevant because negritude poems 'expressed common concern for the predicament of their [poets'] race and the legacy of a colonial bondage' (219). More importantly, Finn tells us 'they expressed deeper sentiment of exile and suffering which Europe caused them' (67). For instance, Finn describes Damas' *Pigment* as 'synthesis of revolt, anguish, the affirmation of black values and dignity and the negation of cerebral whitewashing' (67).

Negritude and Modern African Literature

Despite criticisms against Negritude, the movement had influenced and still influences African literature. This fact owes to the claim of John and Clive that,

> The spirit of African civilization animates, consciously or unconsciously, the best negro artist and writers today, both in Africa and America. Insofar as they are aware of African culture and draw inspiration from it, they rise to international status. Insofar as they turn their backs on Mother Africa, they degenerate and are without interest (82).

Indeed, many Francophone African writers contributed to Negritude literature as they produced works focused on the plight of their people. Among them are Mongo Beti, David Diop, Birago Diop, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Paul Niger, Sembene Ousmane and Guy Tirolien. The 1970s witnessed a dramatic shift in style where writers like Ahmadou Kourouma of Cote d'Ivoire introduced his native Malinke linguistic features into French.

Younger generations of writers are creating a new type of language that draws the readers into African daily life; for instance, Congolese Daniel Biyaoula's Alley Without Exist, Mauritian Carl de Souza's *The House Walking Towards the Ocean*, and Cameroonian Calixte Boyala's *The Lost Honors*.

Anglophone literary culture is not devoid of the Negritude influence. Harrow refers to literature – novels, plays and poems, of Anglophone countries of 1950s and 60s as 'literatures of testimony' (15). Novels such as Flora Nwapa's Efuru, Elechi Amadi's The *Concubine*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* are examples of literature of testimony because they attempt to respond to the derogatory representations of, and myths about African cultures and are concerned with representing African reality and valorizing African culture.

Negritude Influence

on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Amadi's *The Concubine*

Negritude, we have emphasized is the assertion of self-worth and identity, a return to original cultural roots and a correction of misconceived ideas about the black continent and black people. *Things Fall Apart* and *The Concubine* are two novels remarkably influenced by the ideologies of Negritude. They are primarily meant to change the negative images or misrepresentations of Africa as done in works like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,*(1899) Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), and Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan*. In these works, Africans are regarded as savage, uncivilized, primitive people of no culture but with a fetish religion. It was the initiation of Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Amadi in *The Concubine* to not only repudiate the western stereotypes of Africa and Africans but also to place at the centre of their narratives, an African living and breathing in an African language or milieu where even the weather and the cold wind, and the harmattan are indigenous and culture specific, as well the role of the god in determining the course of events for mortal man and his temporal world. The novels explored the settings of Omakachi (*The Concubine*), and Umuofia (*Things Fall Apart*) as microcosm of the macro African Society.

It is vital to reminiscence the fact that Christian missions and the Colonial Schools backed by the coercive force of the Colonial state were the elementary agents of transformation. The civilized, western-educated Africans were the targets of the worst form of Colonial racism. This led to a desire of reformation and reorientation of consciousness among the educated. Africans through their writings, which saw the origin of movements like Negritude, African Aesthetic and political Nationalisms made independence possible. The cultural-artistic decolonization, this

fashioning of creative originality from both indigenous and borrowed materials, became phenomenal in its success (Schwarz and Sangeeta, 273).

Achebe's novels focus on the tradition of Igbo society. Smith contents that 'all his works… voice a concern for the loss of native culture in the flood of imported European values' (233), particularly his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe tells us most recently before his demise that *Things Fall Apart* is 'the history of Colonization' (*There was A Country*, 19). Beyond colonization, however, is the projection of the Igbo people's culture and world view. Achebe devotes more than half of the novel to portray Igbo society with all its myths, legends, beliefs, customs, superstitions and taboos which are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people. In fact, with *Things fall Apart*, he brings back the entire society into the folds of history. The entral character, Okonkwo, is a staunch champion of the Igbo tradition. His tragic downfall symbolizes the fall and disintegration of an ancient society. The African man depends and lives closely and in harmony with nature. They respect seasonal changes with an almost religious fervour, preparing themselves for the best and the worst. The myths and beliefs associated with season compel them to perform certain rites and rituals which shape their consciousness and their daily lives. They even have their judicial system – a village council to settle disputes and punish offenders. The daily life of the people is governed by the belief in gods and goddesses whose omnipotence they dare not challenge lest they incur their wrath. Ancestral worship as well as respect for the old is deeply ingrained in their psyche as they must worship the deities. In fact, the novel's appeal lies in Achebe's portrayal of the communal life of the Igbo. He brings to attention the weakness of these people, the ruthless laws of tribal society, its treatment of women and children and the custom of discarding twins. Such subtle practices observed by the society are deftly woven into the fabric of the text to lend them the legitimacy of a tribal way of life.

Things Fall Apart reveals culturally that the Igbo community is ordered around a hierarchy of male elders who serve as collective leaders in both the secular and spiritual realms. These elders (Ndichie) consist of respected men and achievers in the land. The ancestral spirits command respect and fear from members of the Community. In an incident which warrants the intervention of the Egwugwu (ancestral spirits), the Umuofia Community assembles in the village square to hear their [spirits'] verdicts. The verdict of the ancestral spirits is final and binding on the disputing factions.

In *Things Fall Apart*, festivals and ceremonies like New Yam festival, serve to reaffirm commonality. The New Yam festival plays significant role in the lives of the people and the gods,

> …it was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess

> and the source of all fertility…. to honour the earth goddess and the ancestral spirit of the clan. New Yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers. Man and woman, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam festival because it began the season of plenty – the New Year (26).

Another aspect of culture that Achebe projected in *Things Fall Apart* is that of marriage, its processes and its phenomenal essence. During marriage rites, friends and families of the two families are present. It shows that marriage among the Igbo people is not just between the bride and bridegroom, the entire community is involved. The bond which is cemented with the marriage lasts beyond the ceremony and breeds enduring goodwill between the relevant communities. Chapter twelve gives us the pomp and pageantry that follow marriage. The details make it abundantly clear that marriage is not a brief, one day affair, but an enduring ritual which binds people, families and communities, and turns strangers into not only friends but also kinsmen and kinswomen.

The Umuofia people believe in reincarnation and the ancestral spirit and see life as a continuous process even after death. Achebe tells us,

> The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festival and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors…. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites, which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors (86).

This belief summarizes the African cosmology especially with regard to religion. Metuh asserts that 'the conception of life and death for the Igbo is one of cyclic process in the sense that death is not the terminal, the end point of human life, rather it is only a phase in the continuing round of human existence' (107). Onwuatuegwu adds that 'the Igbo conceive life as cyclic. It is a process of birth, death and rebirth; life is equally communitarian in nature…' (41). And, Asouzu insists that 'a human person…has therefore a destiny beyond mere corporeal existence' (149). In all, *Things Fall Apart* mirrors Igbo cosmology, sensibilities, culture and world view.

Amadi's *The Concubine* is another novel influenced by negritude which reflects African village life, customs, beliefs and religious practices as they were before contact with the western world. It is vital to state that unlike *Things Fall Apart*, there is no mention of western influence in *The Concubine*. However, the novel is about the cultural norms of the Omokachi people and that cultural fervour gives it timeless quality. The rhythms of village life and the routines are immutable. The plot of the novel reveals a doomed love. It revolves around a young beautiful human and well-behaved

Ihuoma who belongs to Nigerian's Igbo ethnic group. Her plight involves her past life when she was said to be the wife of the mythical Sea King deity. This gives her great status in the present but portends doom for any mortal man who seeks her hand in marriage. For this reason, Ihuoma is widowed three times as a result of the wrath of the Sea King toward those who would usurp his bride. This does not deter Ekwueme, who passionately falls in love with Ihuoma. Ekwueme is, however, betrothed to Ahurole since childhood. He later marries her according to tradition but the marriage does not endure even with the love portion from Ahurole. Ekwueme opts for Ihuoma, but, like all other husbands of Ihuoma, he is doomed to death.

The dilemma that confront and finally destroy Amadi's heroines and heroes derive entirely from the beliefs, practices and events of their indigenous culture. Beyond the destruction of his characters, Amadi projects an ideal society with enviable culture. It is a society where beauty is measured not only by the woman's features or looks, but more importantly, by the innate characteristics of the woman. Ihuoma, whose beauty attracts all men and women in the villages of Omokachi, Omigwe and even Chiolu, maintains rational behaviour, intelligence and social decorum. Ihuoma is a model of perfect beauty and morality,

> She was young; it was easy to reckon her age. Ihuoma's complexion was that of an ant-hill. Her features were smoothly rounded…. Ihuoma's smiles were disarming. Perhaps the narrow gap in the upper row of her white teeth did the trick. At that time, a gap in the teeth was fashionable. Ihuoma's gap was natural and other women envied her. Her beauty is the scale of all women who want to be considered beautiful. Everybody envies her. Everybody wants to be her. Further, in truth, she wanted to gaze at herself. That she was beautiful she had no doubt. That did not make her arrogant. She was sympathetic, gentle and reserved (15.)

These characteristics of Ihuoma place her on the pedestal of the tribal and communal centre of exemplary womanhood and motherhood. For the male, the concept of handsomeness and strength is measured not just by looks but by his performance in wrestling, in hunting, and willingness to go into battle with the machete, always ready to defend his village against the enemies and the ability to maintain his wife and raise children. Physical deformities and incapacity or abnormality are considered ugly. A man who is not able to win wrestling matches is denigrated and labelled weak. Madume, though considered a successful man at the age of early thirties, was not considered strong. He was not a good wrestler, although he danced well to the beating of drums.

One of the most elaborate cultural traditions practised in the novel is the

custom of marriage. It is almost as we have it in *Things Fall Apart*. Mbiti states that,

> Marriage is a complex affair with economic and religious aspects which often overlap so firmly that they cannot be separated from one another…. For Africans, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Marriage is a duty, a requirement… he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel, and a law breaker, he is not only abnormal, but 'underhuman'. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected the society and the society rejects him in return (58).

It is the awareness of the above facts that makes parents highly concerned about the marriage of their children. One significant point about marriage in *The Concubine* is that a child (male or female) can be betrothed and nothing would stop the marriage of betrothed persons. This is the case of Ekwueme and Ahurole. Ekwe is five years old while Ahurole is eight years when they are engaged. Love plays little or no role in such a marriage but the wishes of the parents and the circumstances surrounding the betrothal prevail. All these combine to make marriage processes and rites very elaborate in Omokachi and the surrounding villages.

Another custom that is highly elaborate is the observance of death rites of a member of a family and community and the superstitions involved. When Ihuoma's first and legitimate husband, Emenike, died owing to lock chest, Wigwe village mourns for eight days for his demise. People show much care for their neighbours. He is buried within his rich compound, preferably his backyard. It is believed that his spirit will protect his property and his family. All the long and elaborate burial ritual is hinged on belief in reincarnation as in the case of Umuofia in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The people hinge their lives, successes, loves and fears on the spirit of the ancestors and their gods. Each part of the earth is ruled by a god. The gods, Osundare contends, do 'not only control human beings and their affairs, they also direct the plot and events mediated through them' (102). Often mentioned and feared by the villagers are the god of thunder, Amadioha, Ojukwu, a god of the air and the forest, and Ani, god of earth. Each person is ruled by his personal spirit-god. No one can go against the spirit but the spirit can go against the person like what happened in the wrestling between Emenike and Madume. At the individual level, however, the *Chi*, interpreted by some as guardian angel, appears to play a more active role in the affairs of any individual. The belief is that a person's *Chi* has direct hand in his or her affairs; the Igbo idea of destiny and free will is bound up with *Chi*.

The practice of the medicine men is accepted as holy, healthy and healing. The medicine man may pray to the gods on behalf of the people; he acts as a village doctor, he acts as a prophet who can see the future. Both Anyikwa and Agwoturumbe see the impending death of Ekwueme. Both are afraid of the Sea king, who, legitimately owns the sea goddess, Ihuoma, who chose to be human. Hence, the medicine man is as ubiquitous as the needs of the people. In all, *The Concubine* deals with tough cultural subjects of tradition, expectation, doomed love, and rules of the society. It also preoccupies itself with longing and love as well as respect and what effect all of those can have on humans. Finally, it concerns itself with religion, divinations and appeasement of spirits.

Conclusion

Negritude movement and ideology is one of the movements that attracted wide ranging criticism. Yet, a well-meaning and intellectually honest critic would not, in any way, underrate the fundamental role of Negritude to the consequential emergence of modern African literature, not only in poetic genre, but also in prose and drama genres. In fact, Negritude is germane and sine qua non to any discussion on African literature. This is evident in *Things Fall Apart* and *The Concubine*. A cursory glance into Africa's epochal and historical experiences would factually enable us to bear with whatever the excesses and romanticism the negritude founders have been accused of. The undeniable fact remains that it has played, is playing and will continue to play a significant role in discussions of contemporary African literature.

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* Florence Egbulonu, BA. ED, MA, Imo State polytechnic, Umuagwo.

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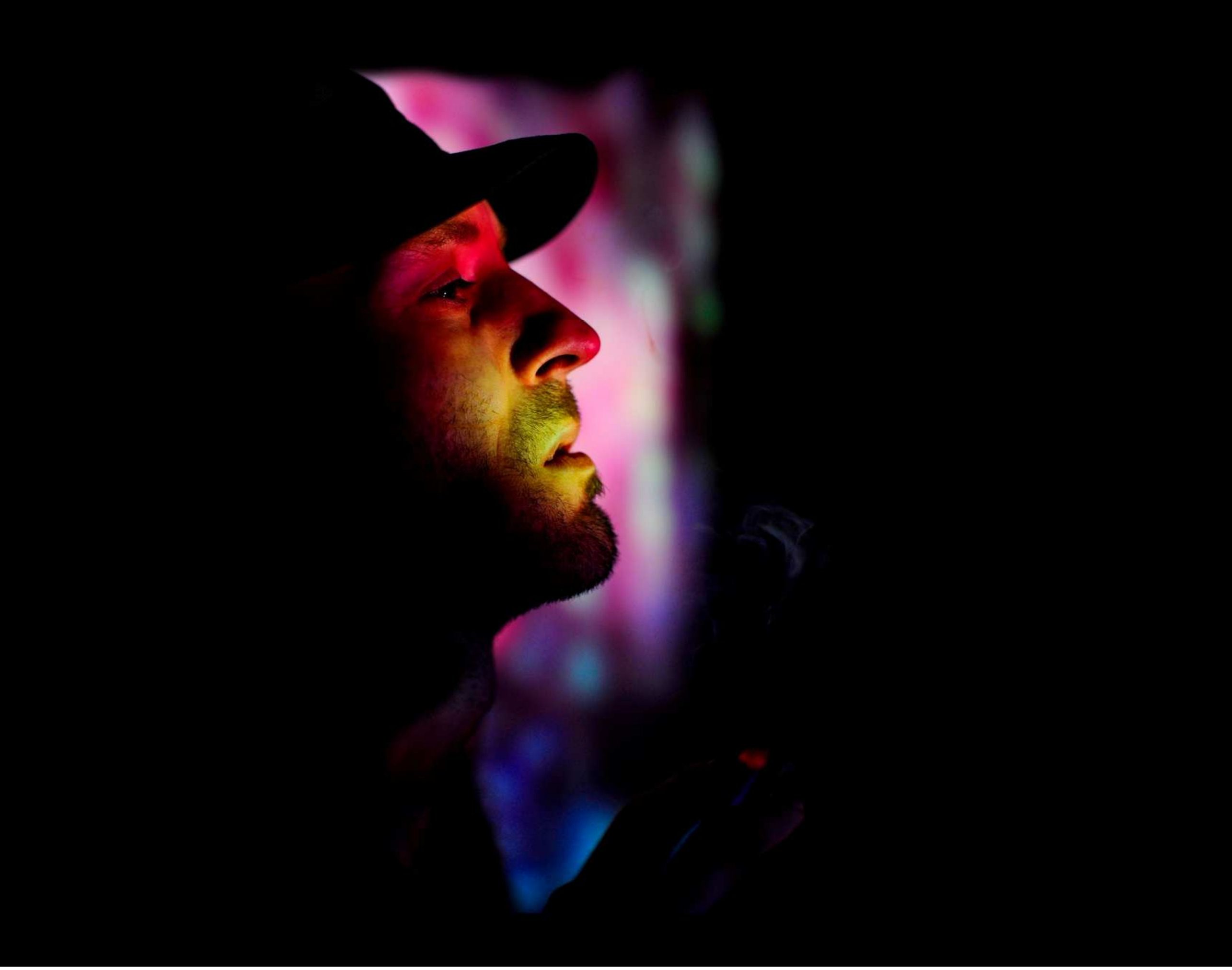
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Anna Gladkowska - Poland



Interview with

AGDA BAVI PAIN

Selected Writings

EUROPAIN

*(poems from eponymous book of poetry **Europain** (Ars Poetica, 2013)*

working class

you gave life to hammer and axe too,
you bent your back for an anvil
you kneaded the mud for a bread, jug with the water, shelf full of gods.
you breathed direction to the flags, discovered warm water.
sold your soul to rock 'n' roll and received just downfall of tomatoes.
work sets free. even if you together with slaves and millions of wretches
were never begging under the gates of death factories.

now you know the real price, when the bill must be paid
and ordered one more round to heroes' health
long live Janosik, Rozsa Sandor, Nikola Suhaj, Cartouche!
for that they didn’t rob you of taste to live bravely.

from time immemorial this land was furrowed by ploughs,
sickles and hammers. whole regiments
golden ages of the iron age. maps on the carpet. eyes full of sands.
work is a class act. a fact bare fact
cruel goddess to whom you upraise your hands

* *Poem is also a part of the **European Constitution in Verse** (Brussels, 2009) as **The right to Work**.*

the right to left

neither mother has no limits
of fulfilled breasts and wide smile
when you find the way to her from
the both sides mummy, blood and milk.
it seems like nothing is right

we have hanged hangmen and gallows up on the hook
neither I wash my hands with holy water. my forefathers
were rivals to the death and I am their blood pact
that still put drops nowadays

like buggered prisoner in solitary cell
the agent of state police and pensioner.

my father. his ashes
in my hands. fly-spots all over the portraits
of emperors lords

no matter which side you are standing on
in front of the mirror. if there’s left

heart in the right place

to our gods

take this song like a living sacrifice. endless thanks
for the knees which taught us humility and also for
freeborn laugh made by all those your comedies.

let never let heaven become clouded above us all
under the circle of stars shaving our eye-brows
or in Alfa Romeo listening to the Omega from Hungary.

domestic patrons, good sprites, merciful fairies
all the gods of the old world and a new testament

Rod, Zeus, Thor and thousands of others completely
without name in your name I sing every night for hours,
I kneel awake holding a brush and shells with blended pigments
today back deep in a cave which shall reveal my next dream

~~VEREJNÁ~~ VÝPOVEĎ

to Vám

~~povedám~~ vypovedám

tak prisahám

ako už bolo vypovedané
že všetko čo viem čo poviem
že budem a budem iba číru
nech sa prepadnem
neozbrojený

týmto aktom – týmto dňom
vypovedám

zmluvu tejto society
slovo celému slovníku

vypovedám
prichádzam spoza rieky Hornád
a nenesiem dobré správy a komentáre
z poľa medzinárodných vzťahov
čas zberať zo dna verejnosti
perly svíň

týmto aktom – týmto paktom
vypovedám
pokľaknutosť

poslušenie

oddanstvo

vypovedám

de facto som odrovnaný a mŕtvy

de iure ma čaká znovuzrodenie

obrátenie svätého Antonyma

a kopec papierovania

k tomu

a

tá výpovedná hodnota

ten oceľovo spevný charakter

týmto aktom – týmto dnom

vypovedám

domovinu

pokolenia

budúcnosť

nemám ďalšie odpovede

Vaša ctihodnosť

** Poem in original Slovak language from the latest book of poetry* ***Pästiarsky list.*** *Drewo a srd, 2017*

Partisan girl

(intro short-story from the latest prose book ***Exit from Eden****.KK Bagala, 2016)*

Small lights in the dark blink like a coal of cigarette. Somebody enjoys it, others have to blow off.

Smoke to the face.

I close my eyes and breath deeply through the nose my fantasies. Thousands of stars hang over my head, millions of other worlds, clouds of dimensions. And here I am making poems about cigarette.

From the trench behind my back I catch the blissful aroma. A bunch of soldiers passes around the hand-made joint with a disgusting wet bottom. Saliva mix, hear champing, cough. And Geňo immediately comes in, he smelled the smoke, he's got a good nose like an animal from a Russian shelter. He gets it out of the first hand without asking and inhales hotly one pull after another and smokes with his nose like a factory. Right at the moment there's a circle of screaming guys around him. They are shouting aloud one over each other, encouraging a veteran and making the bets:

"One hundred!"

"Two hundred! Two hundred and fifty!"

The others are counting down how many pulls are left for Geňo to reach a round hundred:

"Twelve!... Eleveee... Eleven!... Ten! Nine!"

"Geňo, Geňo, go! Only five! "

And Geňo took five. And then ten. We watched him enviously and regretted the puffs that we could enjoy by ourselves. But we had to be heroes like Geňo first. Geňo came to avenge. In his burnt fingers he holds nothing but the remaining glowing coal and enjoys the smoke to the last cloud with a calmness of ruler of fire. It is not physically possible to smoke it no more.

"Geňo, take a puff!"

"Geňo! Don't be a prick! Take five more!"

Geňo smiles and inhales as many times as he wants. In front of his unshaven face he opens an empty hand and blows out the smoke that dwindles away right before our eyes. He raises his bare hands over his head like a magician. Cigarette is gone. Our last one. We could share it, hand it over to each other in a partisan way. I sigh dryly.

We walked miles across the landscape deserted from horizon to horizon. All days in the desert march, without fuel, without cigarettes. We unlearn to sing

quickly, but it was worse with other things. Here, all the heavy machines and even small cigarette rolling machines were completely useless to us. As far as we saw everywhere just the stones, sand and nothing more. In the desert place every grave is too shallow, and therefore the heap of the boulders is banked upon it as a monument as well as an anchor. We step by step, one foot in front of the other, and kick the stones in front of us. Scattered mounds and tombstones, which was not touched even by the strongest desert storm, when you can not see half a meter ahead and the sand comes alive like a swarm of death mosquitoes. We walk down the endless cemetery and we feel we're going to be home here soon.

We raise attack just a moment after the finished coal Genadij had clutched in his nails. In the chaos and animal rage I can see how the explosion ripped the company commander to pieces and all of my remaining hopes too. I have no breath. Step back. The ground. I fall just right afterwards into mud of blood with a direct shot through the lungs. I crash down on my back with straight hoofs. I raise my head powerlessly. I look amazed at the body above me. All my life just flies before my eyes. That’s not life.

Geňo bends down to me. He's all hot. In the air I feel the penetrating scent of fire and in my mind I see her, sweet partisaness, the partisan girl, a beautiful white hand-made cigarette. Geňo hugs me, he kisses me tightly on my mouth, and I have to get up quick to get some of his smoke. With my very last power I go, take a draw a deep breath and close my eyes. Geňo is running away. Just to help the others. I'm not alone here. From the hole burst in my chest, a small cloud of smoke escapes up to the sky. The original Turkish tobacco with a camel on the package. I inhale him hungrily for one more time and savour his scent on the tongue with a feeling of mercy and endless consolation. I hold my breath. This one I’ll leave all alone just for myself.

I look at the sky. Still the same stars over the head, unmoved and certain. They coolly watch the bloody struggle for holy things, for fuel, women, for cigarettes. And I suddenly see that the smokers are gods. Heaven, they enjoy their place up there, high above us and over the burning battlefield. Their cigarette coals blink, the pale lights become weak.

I'll let the ashes drop on my head.

Translation © Dasha Brandtner

Agda Bavi Pain (1979) is a Slovakian author from Košice. He is a writer, screenwriter and a frontman of the banned music band Liter Gena, performing under different assumed names and symbols. Pain has published prose, poetry, and reviews in the press, radio and television in Slovakia as well as abroad. Apart from literature, he also works for television, film and theatre and created various TV series, shows and advertising campaigns. His provocative debut poetry book *Skin & Bone* (Kosť & Koža, 2002) was acclaimed by the critics as well as readers and also made a controversy as it was claimed as the first real satanic poetry ever and attacked by catholic church representatives. His first prose was awarded with prestigious The Big Prize for Literature from Eastern Europe Bank Austria Literaris 2008 for gory gangster novel *The End Of The World* (*Koniec sveta*, KK Bagala 2006) from among 800 books. The novel was released in German translation (*Am Ende Der Welt*, Wieser Verlag) in two editions in 2008 and 2014 and the feature film *Babie leto* (directed by Gejza Dezorz, produced by ALEF Film & Media) based on the book story was the third most attended Slovak films in 2013. Book of poems *Pästiarsky list* (Fist List) was released in September, 2017.

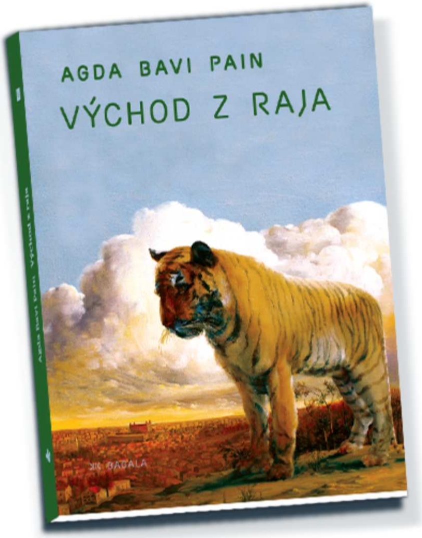
What does the name *Agbar Baba Pan* mean to you? Is it just a pseudonym, or is there a specific significance beneath this name?

My name means for me freedom in the first place. Freedom of speech, freedom of art, freedom of being myself. There is no specific reason except that it's all mine and only mine. If you want to be free you have to be free with all consequences. You have to throw away all your family, all the connections, the history, the future. You know that there's some of these things somewhere but you just can't count or even rely upon them. You are the only one god to yourself. You are the only one who can help you and take care of everything that matters. There's just no other way.

How do you think of your Turkish origin?Do you feel strange somehow?

I'm a stranger to myself just like to the other people. So sometimes it seems that my only duty is to find myself as well as to search the way to other people and society. But there are more reasons why I feel so… I don't belong to consumer society, corporate business or commercial arts, I'm a vegan, an anarchist and libertarian, I do not belong to any generation. My parents were already old as soon as I was born and they were also prosecuted during communist regime that lasted for 40 years and has ended just 28 years ago. My mother's family was so called "kulak", they were the farmers and tradesmen that didn't want to give their business, estates and all the money over to state ownership. My father is dead for 20 years now but he fought in





World War II when he was just 16 and he was sentenced to death because he escaped from the army. Then when he was 25 he was imprisoned for 10 years for an anti-communist activity. So yes, I feel strange all my life when you have to live besides people that cause a hurt to you for so many times. But that's the way it should be.

You are a writer, poet, screenwriter, and artist. Do such many fields pull together to make it easy for you to create?

It makes it very difficult and tough for me. But it gives me also a more freedom with different subjects and literary forms. Every kind of work is suitable for different

kind of expression and execution. So it is very hard and complicated to jump from one thing to another and change the different styles of work and narration. But I just try to utilize everything what I got – and I have got it for free from all the books, movies and art works all around me. So I have to pass it all over to the next generations. It's a kind of duty and absolute necessity for me.

What is so special about being an underground poet? How does it matter to you in person?

I think there is nothing special except that it's a special tough and challenging. Being underground is like being more truthful, more true and hardcore to yourself and also to the art of poetry and everyday life. No taboo, no harmless cliché, no lies.

Is the response of the reader concerns you?

I am the only reader that I'm concerned. Mainstream, fame and all that publicity are nothing for me. But it doesn't mean that the audience is irrelevant to me. Quite the opposite.

Are there special readers that you imagine when you are writing?

The only special reader I'm thinking of is just me. I love reading good literature so I'm trying to make some new one. I just don't want to use modern and popular trends to make myself more famous and successful. I don't need to attract consumers taste as far as I want to be free and do what I'm doing. It just gives no sense to me at all.

Press describes you as a 'conflicting type', and that you 'tend to free sadism', is it because of writing or behaving?

When you try to explore new territories or relations, you have to count with conflict in every way. I just try to be the best and honest to every living creature. But I know I'm doing bad things at the same time – whether I want to or I don't. You can't comply with everybody. I'm just trying to be humble to myself as well as the world as a whole.

Is it really that you deal with criminal activity and drugs in tolerance way?

I was dealing with people from that kind of society mostly when I was young – just like a lot of other young people and my friends too. Gypsies, asocials, punks, rockers with long hair and other cultural subgenres from the "rotten western civilization". In the historical center of the downtown in Košice where I was born there were plenty of bizarre figures and legendary persons connected with underground world and the crime but it was everything but not the so called "big crime". In the totalitarian communist regime in former Czechoslovakia, it was the only way how to make your own inner asylum, escape all those marasmus and protest against the antihumanitarian system. Also if you were different and you had a long hair for example you were treated like a criminal so there was no other way to be independent and free anyway.

In your last prose book – short story collection Exit from Eden (Východ z raja, 2016), you are dealing with a sort of post-apocalyptic war, and we may say the same about The End of the World (Koniec sveta, 2006, Am Ende der Welt German edition 2008, 2014). Does thinking about the destiny make you pessimistic?

As it was said – pessimist is just a well informed optimist. I'd rather see things through the realistic and maybe pessimistic point of view than be

fooled and fool other people around me. I hope that there will be happy end for everything. But, you know, any ending is not a kind of optimistic perspective – as far as we are talking about our world and the whole mankind.

What do you think of the Ottoman legacy in Eastern Europe, does it last?

Everything bad is good for some other purpose/reason. Ottoman empire and the Turkish domination in Eastern and Central Europe in 16th century is generally received and viewed as very bad times and it lasted for 150 years. But Turks also brought us coffee, tobacco and other gastronomical and cultural traditions. Also there was more liberal atmosphere in terms of religion so Non-Catholics and Protestants like the Calvinists and Lutherans had freedom and were equal too. If you are asking about Ottoman legacy the people in Slovakia are still kind of afraid and suspicious but we have to admit that we're also offspring of Turkish men because lot of them stayed here despite the fact that Ottoman army was defeated in the Battle of Vienna 1683. And so here I am.

Is there a social role for literature and poetry?

Absolutely. Literature and poetry are able to connect people together now and even after hundreds of years. Sometimes it seems that some of the master works are more powerful with every year. Every reader is also an author when he feels and understands things in the same way as the book he's reading. It's social role but a suicidal mission too.

Literature is said to be in a social crisis. What do you think of such situation?

I think it is said every time for maybe last hundred or two hundred years. But I can say you just one thing: literature will go on and it doesn't matter what kind of new crisis and human society will come. Even robots and humanoids or any thinkable thinking entity will appreciate it. And you can be dead certain of it!

Reem Tombokt*

Bathtub Water

> *This is self-therapy; writing therapy; blogging therapy. This is not for you. This is an extremely selfish act. This is self-love; self-care. This is not to entertain you. This is not being written for any of you. This is not for compassion. This is not for empathy. It is certainly not meant so you can relate to it. This is a purely selfish act. This is for me.*

I do not remember the first time I was rejected. Was it when I asked for a new toy? Or was it when I wanted that pair of trousers that I even cried for? I do not remember. It probably even happened before that. Maybe it was when my mother weaned me. Probably it was when she occasionally ignored my infantile cries. I do not remember my first rejection, I only know there is always a first time.

I do remember other rejections, though. And as I soaked my body in the bath water this evening, I tried to count them one by one. First, there was the one about my writing. I was told, what I have written could not even amount to the level of being called a story. The plot was thin; almost non-existent. But that unlike other Libyan women, I could write a bit. It was painful. I admit I cried. However, it was only then that I realised how much writing meant to me. It was then that I knew it mattered. It was then I knew I loved it. Now, I just shrug the negative voices off. I know my own limitations. I want this thing so much. So I built what I needed; a strong support system. Today, I write.

Second, comes the professional rejections. The interviewers that never call back. The CVs that fall on paralysed fingers. The fake sorry-s. The emails never received. I grew to click send and forget. I grew to go out of offices leaving the worry at doorsteps. I know my limitations. I know my strengths. I just carry on.

Then, the fresh water pressing my chest down, took me back to the most personal of them all. The romantic ones. The ones of texts forgotten. Of phone calls never retuned. Of I like you -s not reciprocated. The ones of friendships fading behind the shadows of new loves. The rejections of sobbing under hot showers. Of terrible poetry. Of half-written unsent angry



notes. The rejections of 'I am not good enough' -s. The ones that hurt so deep. The ones my friends try to convince me time and again are not against my character. The most personal of them all. The ones that feel like the pressure of the warm tub water pushing my body under. The ones I wish I could drain down with the water. The ones I wish one day to stop having to perform for good. The ones that are still hard to get over; hard to deal with. The ones standing proof that I have tried. The ones that I am no longer afraid of.

I stand tall. The mirror fogged up. I open the window. Pull the drain. The bathtub water goes down; away. It leaves behind traces I wash off. Another rejection cleared and gone.

* Digital artist & occasional writer.



Interview with

IGOR MALIJEVSKY

Selected Works

The Signs

When encountering signs we often feel oppressed. Signs themselves, though, are neither dangerous nor evil. That's just our longing for understanding, and giving each thing a name, that hurts.

We must distinguish between signs and symbols. Symbols are here to represent, they always link one thing to another. Similarly, signs lead to something, but we never find out to where.

Signs, as opposed to symbols, disturb.

Symbols, on the other hand, could be explained.

A sign could be read like an omen. According to the law of physics we begin to grasp the point always just in the moment when is already too late.

A psychological explanation of signs (i.e. subjectivization) is cowardice. Signs bring us real messages, on a plane impalpable by other means. Signs can lead us, despite the fact that they remain incomprehensible.

Signs are born out of chaos. Substance demands freedom of speech, too.

Our world has been perforated by signs. Nothing would happen if we overlooked some of them. We even fail to notice most of them, just like a hunter in the woods who misses most of the prey. Disaster is, when we fail or refuse to read them at all.

What are the signs good for? To those who ask such questions for nothing.

Igor Malijevský

Signs

I was seeking signs in a foreign town
Looking into the yards
Roaming around the streets
Chasing light reflections
Playing the creaking gate,
Howling and whistling
On a gramophone

I was seeking signs in a foreign town
Surveying doorbells
Names of strangers only
I stopped at number thirteen
Whistled an old sign
Into the darkness
Sesame, Sesame

I was seeking signs in a foreign town
A map on my palm
Sky overhead
Grasping at light reflections,
From one lamp to another
With stranger’s shadow always behind,
Different each time

Diary entries, 2001 - 2013

I walk through the spa gardens, a quiet autumn day. All of a sudden, I am passed by a baby carriage with a boy of about one year. He is humming quietly and smiling gently just to himself. He emanates inner peace and heightened awareness. For a moment, we look at each other shyly, a kind of silent understanding between us, then we immediately lower our eyes. A kindred being, a sensitive beginner person.

Frankfurt 2012

As recently as twenty years ago it was socially acceptable to visit friends unannounced. And so households were constantly filled with the anticipation of welcoming a feast, a guest, god into the home. Today, dropping by unannounced is considered a social faux pas. This is just a small illustration of how little our culture today knows how to work with something that hasn’t been planned in advance. One consequence is that the concept of inspiration has been displaced from contemporary artistic discourse. For example, photography today is based exclusively on projects; inspired photography is no longer understood and thus impossible to justify.

Frankfurt 2012

I am slow and pictures elude me. An endless crumbling wall, on it a camera casting a long shadow. A car drives down the road with hundreds of balloons attached to it; half the car disappears completely in their midst… Perhaps someone will paint it.

New York, 2012

Many things have their meaning here. Soup kitchens, old ladies and students at McDonalds; the long lines in front of the lone, reeking toilet at Starbucks; the lives of the regulars, bloodshot eyes, watching the sixteen-year-old waitresses; the hip-hop from the car repair shop smells of jazz, years of resistance and archetypal shamanic rhythms; the kids in the street practicing baseball in front of a building whose windows lead to an endless junkyard – it all begins to make sense, like the behavior of a person born into some kind of fate. The things we hate about the United States are just failed exports. Or, worse still, our own failed imports.

New York, 2012

This morning, I was gripped by a kind of managerial anxiety. A kind of vague sense of being overworked, with so many things waiting for me to deal with. And so, just to be sure I wouldn't forget, I wrote on the edge of a piece of paper: write a poem from the bus, buy wine, finish that short story, go for a walk and take pictures, clean up, make Eva's bed. Only after having stared in disbelief at my managerial list for a while did I realize that I must be happy.

Paris 2010

Today I experienced great joy. At the Louvre, I was composing a picture of the large Ferris wheel out the window, when two photogenic children came running along, each stopping on one side of the window. Immediately, however, their full-figured mother showed up and parked herself and a baby carriage right in the middle of the composition. But then the carriage turned over under its load of shopping bags, bottled water, and toys. The mother leaned over to balance the carriage, which caused her phone to fall out of her pocket, and so – half-mad from this unexpected chaos – she had to get down on her knees. All at once, the composition was clear and I could take the picture.

Paris 2010

You write something about fog. I respond with a sentimental answer. The words, stripped down to bare symbols, bounce off a satellite. Isn't it cowardly to use them to replace the temporary lack of closeness? Probably yes. But this cowardice comes from the misunderstandings that might arise from silence. Few people today interpret silence as an expression of trust in a profound and steadfast co-existence.

Paris 2010

The area around Saint Istvan Park reminds me a little of Prague's Vinohrady. The sixth district has the feel of old Krakow. The twelfth district is the spitting image of Žižkov before the revolution (and is also disappearing fast). Around Szabolcz Street it is 100% Karlín: factories, train tracks, even the long tunnel under the train station. It is clear to me that something stinks here already. With more and more information, the perception of "something like something" begins to exceed all bounds. It is the brain's attempt at

compressing information. It is the slow end of the promise that an encounter will be unique – it is this uniqueness that saves us, for it is the only thing imbued with meaning.

Budapest 2006

A lamp sways meaningfully on the train platform, as if trying to say something truly important. Unfortunately, nobody is listening.

Moscow 2008

Tenderness requires concentration.

Lisbon 2007

Too much time spent dealing with practical tasks robs us of pathos. This can cause us to view even our own life as a to-do list.

Lisbon 2007

Regardless of their age, the women are all pushing a baby carriage before them. With a doll, a child, rummage. Hope, life, and memories.

Sofia 2004

On the square was a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the pontification of John Paul II. A rock band played on an immense stage decorated with a huge triangle, the crowd was clapping, some young nuns were dancing passionately, a television crew filming them from up close. One thing is clear: kitsch creates a good mood.

Warsaw 2003

There is laundry hanging everywhere here, in every street and from every window. From the laundry, you can tell who lives in which flat, how many family members there are, how many children; to a significant extent, you can identify the prevailing atmosphere in the family, their taste and their status. In this city, dry and freshly washed human souls flutter in the breeze.

Lisbon 2007

Calling home. Nothing is all right. I feel that I should pack and go home. But that probably wouldn't solve anything... The ability to open yourself completely, to give yourself to the situation, place and people where you currently find yourself, is without a doubt a form of infidelity. Perhaps the hardest of all...

probably Berlin, 2001

The Germans are the only nation to have their own Christmas policeman. Or perhaps soldier. When asked for his origin, they hesitate; they don't understand – he's simply a part of Christmas.

Berlin 2011

The solitary man in front of the department store looks into the sky; he stands there languidly watching the birds fly by. Everyone else is rushing home with their loot. When I walk up to him, I notice that he is urinating into a planter.

Prague, sometime at the beginning of the millennium

Negatives should be discarded once they have surrendered their story. Cruelly and uncompromisingly, like witnesses to yesterday's emotions. Get rid of them while there is still time, while you are the master of your past. Engage in this cleansing ritual, burn your bridges and set out for the next story.

Čelechovice 2013



Fata Morgana



Fake Madonna

Igor Malijevský was born in Prague in 1970. He studied theoretical physics as well as philosophy at Charles University, but since the mid-1990s has devoted himself primarily to photography and writing. He has published three books of poetry and two collections of short stories, including *Moon Above the Tagus River* (2014); he established and leads EKG, a well-known monthly literary cabaret in Prague. His stories and poems are based on a poetical understanding of our everyday reality, a style he describes as "photography in words." His works have been translated into Russian, English, Polish, German and other languages, and he has exhibited his photographs in the USA, China, South Korea, the Philippines, and Europe. His recent work includes books of photographs *Igor Malijevský – Photography 1996 - 2016*, accompanied by texts in Czech and English.

You studied physics for many years, but art was your choice after all. Is there a relation between these fields, science and art?

I had two reasons to study physics. First both of my parents were scientists and I had never problem with mathematics. The second reason was political. I grew up in the time of communist regime and humanities were very affected by ideology in that time. Shortly after our velvet revolution, when system has changed to democracy and freedom of speech was re-established in my country I took lessons of philosophy in the Charles University in Prague to complete my education as many other students from technical sciences did in that time. So we were mixed class, half humanists and half scientists. Humanists rarely created a real question; they would feel showing their intellectual weakness. They preferred statements. We – scientists had no problem to express, for we don't understand something. We had an experience that truth is something which is out of us and we have to search it.

This ethos as a formal time scientist I am still keeping in my photography. I am not creating my private visions. I don't manipulate objects and people around me. I like to be surprised by reality. I am not a realist, but reality is the space I am collecting my visions from. The same I can say regarding my poetry. I am convinced that the reality is much more surprising than anything what we could invent. I like the feeling I am not spending my fantasy for what I am creating, but just the opposite, I am feeding my fantasy by that what I see. Every day I am bit more rich.

Writing or taking photographs… What is more important and attractive for you?

I have the only intention, to tell the poems which I see all around me. In dependency on the content I use different languages to express what I need:

short story, poem, photography. The appropriate language means the briefest one.

Was it the meaning of the text, or the significance of the photo that created and arranged *Belomorka* (poems and photographs, 2003) and *Druzba* (short stories and photographs, 2005)?

The text was the main message in both cases. I used my photographs here like a visual material for illustrations. Both text and photograph were originally created independently.

Your book "Photographs 1996-2016" seems to rely on ironies and paradoxes. What is the main message that concerns you?

I am often asked similar question by curators. They were usually asking about "what is my current project about". But "project" is not a generically art notion, the term was adopted to art from the business during last century. I have no project, no clear descriptive message but poetry. If poetry could be compressed to one single message, we would not need it. Paradox is changing our obvious understanding, its challenging our imagination. But I would not say there is an irony present in my works. I may be laugh, but I am never laughing *at* something or somebody. Even when I use some religion symbols in uncommon situation, I am not ironical. I am just wondering what I see and I surprise myself by the new content I uncovered. So I would better say surreal than ironical.

In my country surrealistic tradition in photography is naturally present. For example works of famous Czech photographer Josef Sudek (1896 – 1976) are very lyrical, but in the same moment sometimes very strange and surprising.

Do you take a long time to shoot?

You mean a single picture? Its similar to the time you spend by making a good decision. The process itself is very short, in the field of photography in between 1/125 to 1s. The main work you have to do before shooting and after it. Before shooting you have to walk days and weeks until you will find a good picture. You have to take care about your soul; otherwise you will see nothing. If you are nervous or you have some difficult unresolved problems, you are like blind, you see nothing. And then, finally – you have to through away most of what you did. Everything, what is not strong enough, what is repeating your previous works or works of other artists. In the end when I have some 10 new works per year, I feel lucky.

You play a lot with shadows in this book, is it a sort of hidden, or unobserved, life of things that you are trying to contact?

I would say yes. Generally if you want to over cross the simple realistic image, you need certain level of abstraction. Black and white reduction, unsharpness, composition which means reduction of disturbing content, shadows, darkness. These are the ways how to achieve it. Through the abstraction you are getting in contact with that hidden part of our world. You leave the very certain situation and you get to the space of eternal human feelings.

There are sufferings and daily tragedies too…

I am aware of it. But it cannot be a reason to leave the poetry. The birds are singing even at a graveyard.

What technique do you always use and consider it more professional and creative?

I use classical analog cameras, black and white films and I develop my films and prints myself. This technique which is sometimes considered old fashioned allows me to create archival quality images, which may last as long as the paper itself. This you cannot say about the digital information. Once upon a time all these digital wonders will split to two big hills of zeroes and ones as a memorial of the digital age. Just few archival prints will survive. May be one or two mine? Even if not – it was just a great to walk on the world looking all around and then spend evenings and nights with red lighting and silent music in my magic darkroom.

Affaya Rim*

The Arab Mediterranean Identity

In both the physical and human sphere, the Mediterranean is a crossroads, the Mediterranean is a heteroclite and coherent image into which everything emerges and settles back into an original unit.' Fernand Braudel in this statement (quoted in Lonni 2003) gives a broader sense to the Mediterranean as both a local bridge and an area where human exchanges have been intense during the past and where diversity emerges from unity. The people living in the Mediterranean do have a shared ancient culture and established relations. However today, the sea has been transformed from a spiral of prosperity, full of life and tolerance to a sea representing a block between inter-continental conflicts and contrasts.

The presence of national identities in the Mediterranean is full of controversy because of the doubt around their authenticity. Some of them are, indeed, the result of a long historical and cultural homogeneity; others are the product of imagination and are far from the local history. In fact, many of the Mediterranean nation-states are born from the decolonization process that had massively occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century. The way in which the process had developed came from a new international phenomenon which advocated control of the people's movements by fixing barriers and frontiers. Rather than tolerating and encouraging the fluidity of groups and their unpredictability, the international scenario demanded more management and control. In the meantime, the European concept of national identity has been well-articulated, evoking similarity and shared values, but also suggesting separation and differences from 'the other'.

The breakings off in the Mediterranean basin have been provoked national separations and the emergence of ideas such as civilizations in conflict. The present political landscape together with the emphasis on cultural and industrial inferiority, tend to separate the Mediterranean basin into two parts. The North side is characterized by development, modernization and Western ideas while the South shore is portrayed as the Oriental part, weak and where we find the discomfort of the diversity and the underdeveloped condition. In this regard, the European identity is based on what is common to its citizens, but also what differentiates them from the others, as if the role of identity is to make the distinction between the self and the others. They tend to emphasize their differences from people inside their borders such as the migrants and especially the Muslims living within Europe and outside such as people of the South Mediterranean. In this sense , the Mediterranean



seems to be severely split into two distinct parts, and centuries of common history seems to have disappeared from memories.

It is worth here to mention that the Mediterranean is not composed of a single and static identity. Indeed, we need to think in terms of multiple belongings, as a person from the Mediterranean can enjoy different belongings to social groups without losing his or her own specificity. In fact, many identities can develop and expand especially if one works on breaking down this dominant North-South dichotomy and the Christian-Muslim opposition. With the purpose of reinventing a common identity, one should look at the reasons behind such a separation and try to solve it by learning from past-mistakes as well as giving new dynamics to the region by emphasizing the foundations of a common society. The Barcelona process has tried to put into practice this movement but without any concrete results. The reasons behind the deep hole separating the two sides of the Mediterranean have not been sufficiently investigated by the persons concerned and this makes conflict inevitable.

In many respects, European and Arabo-Islamic societies are characterized by different cultures, religions and norms, but this does not imply that they cannot get along with each other. These differences have to be examined in order to break down stereotypes and to improve the different understanding of each other. Indeed, ‘Far from thinking of Islam as alien then, the West cannot help but share the understanding of Islam as anything but time-honored and a way of life of peace. Indeed as the Holy Quran (49:12) says: O people! We created you from a single pair of a male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other.’

The question that arises here concerns exclusively the Mediterranean identity. Indeed, beyond the stereotypes and the constructed ideas around this region, what are the components of the Mediterranean identity? As the distinction has already been made at the present, we will have to examine it in terms of the North-South dichotomy, but with great attention not to fall into the trap of caricature. The common memories of the people from the Mediterranean have to be taken into consideration in order to understand past dynamics, but it is also important for building future strategies that would unite the region with respect for people’s mind of both sides.

In this regard, the dominance of Arabo-Muslim culture had begun under the Umayyad caliphate from the mid 7th to the mid 8th Gregorian centuries. During this era, the conquests of the lands stretched from Egypt to Morocco, bringing to nomadic and settled indigenous people the Arabic language, the Arab religion (Islam) and the Arab culture. Today, the Arab majority in North Africa and the Middle East has resulted from past substantial movements of people in this area. Berbers and Copts, who existed there long before the arrival of Arabs, are now considered as minority groups inside the borders of official Arab nations. They have, in some respects, resisted and attempted to impose themselves, but their numeric inferiority has pushed them to adopt some of the dominant aspects of the Arabo-Islamic culture. Indeed, ‘the Copts, who reside in Egypt, are characterized as having adopted the Arabic language while resisting Islam, while the Berbers who reside in the Maghreb did the opposite by maintaining the Berber language while adopting the Muslim faith’ (Dellolio 2008). However, it is well-known that in the Mediterranean region, no religion has ever managed to prevail over another. Indeed, the Mediterranean Sea is a frontier between three continents and a bridge between three monotheistic religions, and its position has always made it a privileged place of intercultural dialogue. In fact, the Mediterranean has always been ’the place where, in spite of Catholic and Islamic holy wars, crusades, the reconquista, the two Ottoman sieges of Vienna, the sad history of colonialism and the bloody wars of colonial

liberation, no universalism or fundamentalism was ever permanently established' (Zolo 2005.)

The Mediterranean is usually associated with the Arab world; but who are really the Arabs? In a time when movies and media dominate the world's perceptions of the others, the Arabs are, in reality, little understood. The classical images of the rich Sheikh, the belly dancers, and the scaring terrorist do absolutely not reflect the diversity of the present Arab society and the richness of Arab history.

Arabs are the people who are, first, united by the Arabic language as their mother tongue and who consider themselves as Arabs. The strategic ethnic designation developed by the British during the hegemony of their empire was to associate the Arab world with the Middle East, which includes also some non-Arab countries such as Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Israel. However, the Arab history is closely related with Muslim history, while the Arabs can also be Christians or Jews, as well as most Muslims are in reality from non-Arab countries such as Indonesia and other countries from sub-Saharan Africa.

Language and literature, and especially poetry, are essential to the understanding of the emergence of a common Arab identity. In fact, before the arrival of Islam, a common poetic language which was Arabic appeared as evidence to a shared culture among the different tribes of the Arabic Peninsula. The poets who illustrate this pre-Islamic age were the political representatives of rivalry in each tribe. They have been composing lyrical poems 'Qasida' to praise the values of their style of life such as honor, generosity, courage, solidarity, loyalty, etc. In this regard, a great proportion of this past common history has been the basis of a common Arab consciousness and a shared sense of identity.

Under European colonialism, the Arab world had cautiously maintained its identity by preserving its hereditary traditions and virtues through a passive resistance which, in reality, has made the Arabs somehow rigid and inflexible in the domains of ideas and education. The foreigners were both admired and feared, their systems, ideas and behaviors were imposed on a population who had already its own cultural identity. Their resistance took the form of returning to original ideas and ceasing to question traditional concepts. Thus, the process of liberation from the outsiders took place by resisting against their values which were intended to dominate people's minds.

* *Al-Akhawayn University, Morocco*



Alessandro Gatto - Italy



Interview with

MÁRTON SIMON

Selected Poems

Objective

This is about a pebble, a simple and smooth
piece of stone sinking in the fine transparent water –
about this, as I will so. This is easy to imagine,
it is safe and just a bit boring. (I wouldn’t be
interested.) Yet it will do – it will as it won’t be
about you. It is about the pebble, in truth. As it is sinking.
This is talking beside the point, of course, but that’s the essence.
It won’t reveal how it feels in your hand –
how it felt. (Though even the pebble knows it.)
It’s not important how your taste moves farther – this white stone
from the surface. So, that’s all to it. It’s sinking.
It loses as much weight as you can express.
But we rarely speak of stones. Even less than
of our lies. For instance. That’s why it’s about the stone.
Or because it’s all the same about what. Because those few words
that are to the point remained with you. This much is left for me.
It’s about that pebble. It fell in bottomless water
and so it is, by and large for ever, sinking.

Translations by István Tótfalusi

Winter, Railway Station

Now this winter. These days.
They're pale blue, they're cold – like
unheated railway carriages – and gloomy.
That which is snowing in me won't melt.
I'm writing. Maybe to forget you so. Maybe so to forget you.
To make spring come, but to let it leave me cold when I hear
That at home inland waters again. That they will wash away
what is still. Your ashes – if there is still anything like them.
To keep me from dreaming of a dark underground ocean
which tosses you up and down, and I know on waking that
it took hold of me, too (my cheeks are wet).
Love is an emptied glass. I'm clutching it.
I ought to put it down. I'm sitting in a diffused light
in the railway station. I'm looking about in the cold.
I failed to bring you sugar that day.
Now I look in vain for a place where I could buy it.
Spring's drawing near. By then I'll set my insomnia against your sleep.
That much is there between us. As if one's pushed by chance.
I feel wrath, I'm not angry. You aren't angry.

Hiánytalanul

megyek a városon át megyek koszos házakban koszos függönyök

a színek nyaralni mentek a színek a tenger temetésén vannak holnap várhatók

venni kéne valami giccset csak szép legyen nagyon emlékezni rossz ízlésre vall

hát ilyen egy idő mit akarjak mégis halált eszem no spicey thank you

az ott egy séta ez itt egy fulladás az égben kopott abroncsok égnek

az ágyamban döglött piros delfinek fehér lepedőn őket ölelgetve alszom

de mindegy éreznimindegy már így is annyi mindentől kell hánynom ha eszembe jut

zsonglőrködöm konzervnevetés konzervfájdalom összefogdosott üvegajtó a lélek

hiába nézek fel nem leszek könnyebb ez csak egy város hát ilyenegy pillanat

a folyó fölött az is fekete nézd mega hullámok nem értik a többesszámot

nem kéne itt állnomcsak ennyi biztos mint amikor azt mondtad *nem kéne itt állnod*

aztán azt hogy *nem kéne itt állnunkés* így tovább hadd ne kezdjek bele

folyik el fogy el apad ahallgatás lassan muszáj lesz beszélnem veled

félek havas táj lett a hangod nyomtalanul tűnnékbenne el

állhatnál ahol nem *kéneölni tudnék egy epersékért* mondhatnád szex után

de a színek nem jönnek vissza a tenger letépett koszos függönya csönd eszi

ez csak egy égő erdő fut a víz felé nem férek el az ágyban a delfinektől

ha kérdeznének megesküdnék hogy eszembe sem jutsz csak ez a város bolyongok benne meddig

de rossz voltde és ezt most úgy értsd ahogy énörömmel nem jelentenék neked újra semmit

Márton Simon (1984) Hungarian Poet, slam poetry performer and translator. He lives in Budapest. Published two collections of poetry (Songs from the Mezzanine 2010; Polaroids 2013). Won 2nd and 3rd places at Slam Poetry National Championships (2012, 2015).

He translated novels from English (e.g. Etgar Keret, The Seven Good Years, Jennifer Egan, A Visit from the Goon Squad) and poems from Japanese (from Ryuichi Tamura, Shuntaro Tanikawa, etc.)

What are you currently up to?

I'm working with my third poetry collection. Since the second one I was writing a lot, but only a handful of poems. I have some other things to do (e.g. translations & other work) but this is my primary concern recently.

A poet, translator, editor, and music organizer, do such many fields pull together to make it easy for you to create?

I honestly don't know whether there is a connection or not between these things in my life. I mean I have a full-time job as an event organizer, besides I work as a freelance translator, sometimes as an editor, and after all these things I work with my poems and slam poetry texts. In my head they are separated, but it's true, that the work with so many different things is inspiring.

What is The Slam? What does it mean to be a member in this movement?

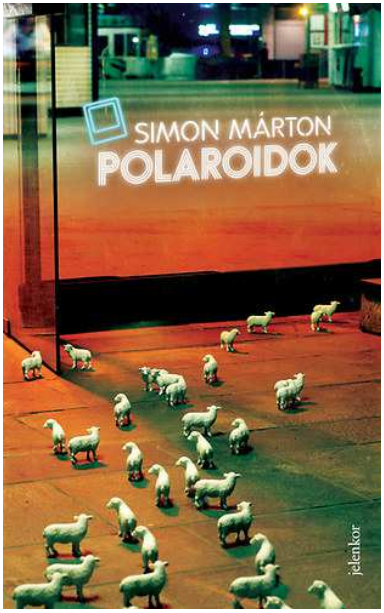
In terms of definition: Slam Poetry – or Poetry Slam – is a genre of performance poetry, which was founded by a man named Marc Smith in Chicago in the 80's. I could talk hours about it, but I think that's the point. It's popular all around the world, we have it in Hungary since 2006.

I'm a regular performer since 2011, and for me this means constant learning. Before that I knew nothing about how to act on stage, how to speak or what to do, not to mention the huge difference between the texts of a poetry collection and a slam performance. I had to learn all these things, and still there is plenty to learn.

Is there a relationship between slam poets out of Hungary?

Of course, we just founded an association together.

Someday you described yourself as a "traditional poet." Is it because of the context or the rhythm?





It was the context… Just like everywhere else, in the Hungarian slam scene there are people with vastly different backgrounds, like journalists, actors/actresses, MCs, teachers, activists, etc. and of course there are some writers too. When I started to participate in slam poetry events, someone asked me on stage who I was, and I said, "I'm a poet in a traditional way". So, this became a constant joke and an *epithetonornans*.

Do you feel competitive when sharing the podium with other poets?

Basically, not at all. I think competitiveness is an unnatural and strange feeling in arts. Although I love this friendly, playful tension of the Slam Poetry contests. But I don't think any of us takes it too serious.

Do you like to surprise your audience?

In a certain sense the audience always should be surprised, yes. I think as a performer You always feel what the audience wants, and for me it is something that should be avoided and exceeded. When they want to be entertained, you should present something more complex, something strange, something thoughtful. But on the opposite too: even between poems of your highest artistic standards, sometimes you should tell a joke. This contrast could give many more dimensions of your performance.

You studied Japanese and translated poems from this extremely difficult language. What effects on your work that you feel they belong to this experiment?

I started to translate post-war Japanese poetry because of its total absence in Hungarian. Since there were some great scholars and translators in Hungary, we have countless very good translations of the classic poets and authors of Japan, but from the last ~70 years almost no poetry at all. And of course, we have Haruki Murakami, Ryu Murakami, Hitomi Kanehara, Akiko Itoyama, Banana Yoshimoto (etc.)too in Hungarian, but I thought we should have ShuntaroTanikawa, YoshimasuGozo, Makoto Ooka, Kazuko Shiraishi and others too. But since my Japanese is everything but perfect, I work with a few friends of mine (some of them are even living in Japan), and they help me with advices on the fine details and other issues.

But I honestly can’t summarize the effects of the Japanese language and culture on my work and my life. I’m studying it for ~10 years and I’m deeply influenced by it.

What appeals to you most about Japanese poetry?

Their different point of view.

You are the author of two poetry collections.*Songs of the Mezzanine* (2010) *Polaroids* (2013), do they get easier or harder as you go along?

It won’t get easier, ever, I guess. Naturally, having all the knowledge and routine of writing for ~15 years helps a lot, but you always end up in front of a piece of blank paper. And it’s quite the same when you think about composing a new poetry collection.

As a follow up, do you have a writing routine you try to keep?

Either I don’t have or it always changes. But I usually take a lot of notes and work with my poems even before start to write them. Maybe that’s the most important for me: I should know, what I want to write.

Who (or what) are you currently reading?

Since I’m in Krakow (Poland) for 3 months, I became curious about the modern classics of Polish poetry. So I’m reading Wisława Szymborska, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert now. And Dorota Maslowska and some LeszekKołakowski too. And Samuel Beckett’s short stories. And William Carlos Williams’ poems. And some Hungarian writers, like PéterEsterházy and ÁdámBodor too. And I just bought a book of Jerzy Pilch.

What one piece of advice could you pass on to other poets?

I’m afraid I don’t have any advices in general for anyone. But if I should say something to poets I don’t know, that would be something like I’m glad they’re here. And keep it up. And take care.

TERESA PEPE

When Writers Activate Readers

How the autofictional blog transforms Arabic literature*

The adoption of the Internet has favoured the proliferation of new forms of autobiographical writing and literary creativity all over the world. Blogs[1] in particular are used by Internet users worldwide to record and share their writing.

The popularity of the blogging phenomenon and the original features of blog texts have also attracted the interest of international scholars. More specifically, a particular kind of blog defined as the "personal blog", which consists of "a blog written by an individual and focusing on his or her personal life" (WALKER 2005), has spurred a significant debate. Most academics agree that the personal blog should be considered a form of diary) LEJEUNE 2000, MCNEILL 2003), thus inserting it in the category of (auto-)biographical writing. It is true that the personal blog shares some features with the diary genre, in that its content is mainly autobiographical and it consists of dated entries, arranged chronologically) in reverse order). However, in addition to recording the user's life, personal blogs allow users to play with their identity, to reveal aspects of their personality while inventing new ones. In his article "The Labyrinth Unbound: The Weblog as Literature", Steve HIMMER points out that besides the record of bloggers' daily lives, personal blogs may include short stories, film reviews, comments about music, book reviews, song videos, and calls for meetings, social events, and political demonstrations; therefore "the fictional is blended with the outside reality and the extra-literary world, the personal is strongly intermingled with the public, and the personal and the political are not discernible" (HIMMER 2004). Building on these emarks, Kathleen FITZPATRICK, in her article "The Pleasure of the Blog", argues that "reducing the personal blog to no more than online diaries or domestic ranting, we are effectively casting aside un-theorized an entire mode of blogging that has a significant literary potential" (2007: 173), and therefore personal blogs might fruitfully be approached as an "emergent literary form" (2007: 168). This ongoing debate shows that personal blogs call for further research, as they are symptomatic of how the Internet forces us to rethink across categories of genre and identity in order to reformulate our understanding of what literature is.

In this sense, Egyptian personal blogs provide an interesting case for analysis. Since 2005,[2] when the Internet became more accessible in the Arab world, many young Egyptians have resorted to blogs to create a space for

self-expression and literary experimentation. The availability of personal spaces for writing, unedited and relatively uncensored,[3] has encouraged amateur as well as more skilled writers to try their hand at writing in this new and uncategorized genre.

In her book *Gender, Nation and the Arabic Novel*, Hoda EL-SADDA has argued that Internet technologies, inasmuch as they have empowered and inspired the new generation of youth to political dissent and organization,[4] have also opened up new possibilities for literary voices to imagine new realities (2012: 214). In a previous article, "*Arab Women Bloggers: The Emergence of Literary Counterpublics*", she analyzes three book-blogs[5] and argues that "blogging has resulted in the creation of literary counterpublics, forums for alternative literary genres, languages and style that are adjacent or parallel to mainstream literary centers" (EL-SADDA 2010: 315). By studying the same book blogs as El-Sadda and comparing them to three Egyptian print novels, Marie Thérèse ABDEL-MESSIH (2009: 515) argues that a new generation of writers, which has emerged from the world of blogging has begun to initiate a break with former narrative modes. Similarly, in his article "Hacking the Modern", Tarek EL-ARISS looks at the intersection between print and digital in the avantgarde novel *ʾAn takūn ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd* (2003; translated into English as *Being Abbas el-Abd*, 2006) by the Egyptian author ʾAḥmad AL-ʿĀYDĪ, and points out that the new technologies are used as a fictional device to foster politically and aesthetically subversive transformations in Arabic literature (2010: 545).

These studies emphasize the importance of exploring the ruptures introduced into Arabic literature by the Internet technologies. However, the authors of these studies discuss the impact of the Internet medium on Arabic literature by looking mainly at literary print works. Therefore, they highlight the urgency of studying these transformations by exploring the intricate web of the blogosphere. In fact, only by looking at a large sample of online texts will we be able to understand the unique features that Arabic literature has developed on the web.

My research in the Egyptian blogosphere highlights that the experimentation with blogging, in particular with the subgenre of personal blogs, has led to the emergence of a new writing genre in Arabic literature that may be defined as the 'autofictional blog'.[6] The genre consists of an online literary autobiographical account that is characterized by a seamless mix of fiction and non-fiction. It is a hybrid genre that mixes autofictional narrative strategies with the aesthetic features provided by the Internet structure, such as the possibility of combining writing with links and audio and video elements and of updating and modifying the text at any time. In addition, the Internet structure promises a freedom of style and content

allegedly not to be found elsewhere, since bloggers do not have to undergo the scrutiny of the gatekeepers of the literary field, such as editors, publishers, and critics.

In this paper, I will explore the literary quality of the autofictional blogs and how it transforms our understanding of literature.

Since 'literature' is in itself a very vague term whose meaning is constantly changing, I find it helpful to discuss this question in the framework of the concrete example provided by a number of Egyptian autofictional blogs published between 2005 and 2011, and relate these to the realm of modern Arabic literature. In my analysis, I will proceed by first relating autofictional blogs to the Arabic notion of a modern *ʾadab*. Then, drawing on theories of autofiction, digital literature, and Arabic print literature, I will explore the innovative features of these texts resulting from the adoption of the Internet technology. These are (1) interactivity, (2) the blurring of the author/main character, (3) the multimedia, open nature of the blog texts, and (4) their stylistic features. I argue that the combination of these elements transforms *ʾadab* into an interactive game to be played among authors and readers, away from the gatekeepers of the literary institutions. By depicting modes of interaction between readers and writers in the Egyptian blogosphere, I will show how the autofictional blog requires the readers to be active participants in the interpretation of the text by discovering the blurred identity of the author/main character; to find their way in the open, multimedia text; and to contribute actively to the plot and style of the narrative.

The *ʾadab* Dimension of Modern Arabic Literature

A possible way of describing the Arabic traditional understanding of 'literature' is to go back to the rich meaning of *ʾadab*, as the French scholar R. Jacquemond has done in his book *Conscience of the Nation* (2008 [2003]). *ʾAdab* is the word used in Modern Standard Arabic for 'literature' nowadays, but the concept is much older. In classical times, *ʾadab* meant, among other things, a corpus of beautiful, entertaining, and at the same time useful works written in a high variety of language.[7] The term also implies a moral component, in the sense of '(mostly) secular norms of conduct', '(ethical) normativity'. Then, during the nahḍah (the so-called Arabic 'renaissance'), a period of intellectual modernization and reforms that took place in the late 19th and early 20th, a transformation of the term *ʾadab* took place in that it began to include literary genres such as the novel, short stories, and drama, and therefore notions of fictionality, originality, and creativity.

JACQUEMOND (2008) explains that the ancient meaning of the word *ʾadab* informed the shaping of a 'modern' literary imaginary throughout the *nahḍah*. The idea of *ʾadab* as instruction through entertainment could be

seen in the fact that the novelistic genre, for example, was admitted into the realm of *ʾadab* by presenting itself as a moral or didactic type of writing that claimed to be as realistic as possible and thus removed from fiction; it was adopted by nationalistic modern writers to forge the idea of a nation and national identity, as is ably shown by Samah SELIM (2004) and Hoda EL-SADDA (2012), among others. Short stories and dramatic pieces were also used by Arab writers in order to illustrate social problems. Later, the idea of *ʾadab* as instruction through entertainment resulted in *ʾadab*'s taking the form of committed literature (*ʾadab multazim*). [8]

JACQUEMOND argues that this understanding of *ʾadab* continues to define what legitimate literature is and what it is not, as good literature is supposed to be entertaining and useful at the same time (2008: 10).

Apart from that, the ancient idea that *ʾadab* has to conform to linguistic norms was at the center of the *nahḍah*'s linguistic project to revive and simplify the Arabic language, and can still be seen today in the fact that good literature is supposed to be written in a high variety of language. As a result, works written in the vernacular have thus far been devalued as 'low' literature or folklore (JACQUEMOND 2008: 9).

However, one can think of numerous examples of Arab literary works that challenge this definition of *ʾadab*. In fact, as Jacquemond points out, over the years, writers and critics have struggled over the definition of what literature is and what it does. He therefore concludes that the distribution of literary practices has resulted into "a generalized interaction and hybridization between elevated and popular forms, native, imported, modern and traditional forms, to the point that no fixed boundary exists between legitimate literature and various other forms of literary practice" (2008: 153).

Internet technology has provided Egyptian amateur and professional writers with additional means to challenge the traditional view of *ʾadab* by enriching it with new meanings and functions.

Internet technology has provided Egyptian amateur and professional writers with additional means to challenge the traditional view of *ʾadab* by enriching it with new meanings and functions.

Going back to the notion of *ʾadab* illustrated above (useful, entertaining, and written in a high variety of language), it is possible to see that some aspects of tarbiya (education) and tasliya (entertaining) can be found to some extent in the autofictional blog.

Many bloggers write in pursuit of literary aspirations and share their writings because they might be edifying and useful for the community. The word used for 'blog', *mudawwanah*, is a passive participle (or nomen loci) from the verb *dawwanah* and thus means 'what is registered, rendered official by

putting on paper' (or the place where this is done). [9] In this sense the function of the blogger resembles the function of the ʾadīb (writer of *ʾadab*), whose task is to record, to document history, besides producing a creative work (JACQUEMOND 2008: 4).

This writing is often informed by political aspirations (and is therefore considered useful for society). Many bloggers write about their life as a means of changing the society surrounding them. This is evidenced, for example, by the following words written by the blogger ʿAbīr SULAYMĀN as an introduction to her blog *Yawmiyyāt ʿĀnis* (Diary of a Spinster):

> فقررت اتخاذ خطوة جريئة الى الأمام .... سأكتب يومياتى - كعانس من وجهة نظر المجتمع .... و كامرأة حرة من وجهة نظر أبناء جيلى ... ليس الهدف منها هو ندب حظى كامرأة لم تتزوج و لكن الهدف هو فتح نافذة جليلى (نساء و رجال) على المجتمع من حولنا كى يرى المحيطين [هكذا!] بنا حالنا و يرفعوا عنا الألقاب البالية التى أصبحت لا تناسب العصر الذى نحيي [هكذا!] به.
>
> So, I decided to take a brave step forward … I will write my diaries—as a spinster from the point of view of society … and as a free woman from the point of view of my generation … My goal is not to bemoan my (bad) luck as a woman who did not marry, but rather to open a window so that my generation (women and men) looks through to see the surrounding society, and so that those surrounding us can see our situation and can relieve us from the worn-out titles which do not suit the time we live in anymore (1 June 2008).

These words highlight that SULAYMĀN is willing to share her life because this might be useful for her peers. By writing about her life, she aims to change the society around her, showing that the prejudices against unmarried people in Egypt do not reflect reality.

As for their entertaining quality, autofictional blogs seem to be engaging and compelling to read, as evidenced by the large readership that many of these blogs have gathered both online and in print. Many bloggers, such as Muḥammad Rabīʿ, ʾAḥmad NĀĞĪ, and ʾAḥmad al-Faḫarānī, have later turned to novel writing and are now at the forefront of the Egyptian literary avant-garde, receiving great acclaim among critics and readers.

However, bloggers dislike being called ʾudabāʾ because they do not see themselves in the tradition of those to whom this term has so far been applied. 10 By using the blog, they hope to change the traditional notion of literature as *ʾadab*; they are eager to produce something new. This point is made explicit in a passage entitled Mulāḥaẓāt ḥawl al-*ʾadab* (Notes about

Literature; 2 November 2005) published in the blog Wassiʿ ẖayālak – ʿiš kaʾannak talʿab (Widen your imagination – Live as if you were playing), written by the Egyptian blogger and writer ʾAḥmad NĀǦĪ in November 2005:

> يجب أن نخلق أدب جديد خالى [هكذا!] من الأفيون... أدب لا يقدم الراحة للقارئ بل يقدم له القلق ويشرخ له سلامه الروحي ويجرحه في مشاعره
>
> We have to produce a new opium-free ʾ*adab* … an ʾ*adab* that does not give rest to the reader but rather arouses anxiety, and that cracks the peace of his spirit and wounds his feelings.

As shown by the passage above, NĀǦĪ and his peers want to transform this notion of ʾ*adab* and revolt because they think that its aesthetics and ideology resulted in a complete exclusion of the reader. The metaphor of the opium shows that they accuse their literary fathers of having (ab)used ʾ*adab* as a means of sedating the readers and making them accept a political, ideological project that was doomed to collapse (as shown six years later by the political uprisings that culminated in the fall of Mubarak's regime).

For bloggers, ʾ*adab* should instead make itself useful by delivering a highly irritating, discomforting, rebellious message that the readers have to interpret by themselves and can contribute to shaping.

This attention to the reader had already been advocated earlier in Arabic literature, by critics like the theoretician of 'national literature' (ʾadab qawmī) ʿĪsā ʿUBAYD, in the *muqaddima* (introduction) to his collection of short stories, Iḥsān Hānim (1964 [1921]). In his muqaddima, ʿUbayd rejected earlier traditionalism and neoclassicism as dated and elitist, as well as Manfalūṭian 'romanticism' as too idealistic and 'passive'; he called instead for a non-elitist, functional style (GUTH 2013). Another attempt at mobilizing the reader was also made by the avant-garde writers of the ḥassāsiyyah jadīdah (New Sensibility) in the 1960s. Here, the authors were eager to refrain from acting as authorities or despots who, like Nasser, would use beautiful language and tell readers what it meant. In order to become conscious participants, readers had to find the meaning themselves.11 More recently, the young Egyptian writer ʾAḥmad AL-ʿĀYDĪ used computer language as a fictional device in his novel An takūn ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd (Being Abbas al-Abd, 2003), in order to shake the readers and stimulate their intervention (EL-ARISS 2010).

However, the activation of the reader remains a fictional device in these works. The autofictional blog, in contrast, actively involves the reader, both in the interpretation and the composition of the text. Besides, as it is

published online, it allows bloggers to challenge the “holiness” of the literary language that they contest.

The autofictional blog: an interactive *ʾadab* (*ʾadab tafāʿulī*)

To some extent, blog authors establish their authority over the text the way traditional authors do. Authorship is identified with a real name or a pseudonym, which appears at the end of each entry and on the blog’s profile page. Individual ownership is often also established through the customization of various elements of the blog’s appearance, through the use of colors, fonts, headers, and personal icons. Blog authors are also able to exercise direct control over access to their territory by others. The majority of interactions takes place on the personal territory of one individual and are initiated, centered around, and regulated by that fact. Bloggers have the ability to restrict readership of their entries; to regulate the posting of comments, either by screening submissions prior to their display or by deleting unwanted comments subsequent to their appearance (MASSERAT 2008). The blogger is the only ‘manager of the site’ who decides what content can be displayed.

However, the most innovative aspect of Internet diaries and weblogs is that they not only make intimate writings potentially accessible to a multitude of readers, but also grant the reader the opportunity to respond directly to the text. The narrative created through the blog is essentially interactive and, as such, turns the literary text into a collaborative effort (SERFATY 2004: 465). Through its continuous updating over the time, the weblog becomes a text that is constantly transformed through the input of both readers and writers (HIMMER 2004).

In the following, some of the literary strategies applied by Egyptian bloggers to activate their readers shall be discussed. As I will show in the next paragraph, one of the tasks conferred upon the reader is to discover the blurred identity that hides behind the narrated events.

The Blurred Identity of the Author/Main Character

In an autofictional blog, the narration is typically done in the first person and deals mainly with the main characters’ inner lives. The author is driven by a ‘quest for truth’ (CUSSET 2012) that consists in speaking out, in revealing his/her innermost emotions and feelings. These are considered the essential traits of the blogger’s ‘true’ subjectivity. Autofictional bloggers often write about feelings of alienation, love, fear, desire for freedom. In so doing, they are eager to address ‘hot’ issues in society, such as sexual harassment, police brutality, homosexuality, or religion, by describing how these issues affect their emotions and bodies.

The representation of consciousness is an element that distinguishes literature from non-literary genres, as argued by Käte HAMBURGER in the book The Logic of Literature (1973: 13). In fact, the scholar Kathleen FITZPATRICK agrees that the literary quality of some blogs consists in "producing a form of subjectivity so pervasive and so apparently natural in a way that transforms blog writing into literature" (2007: 174).

However, in a work of fiction the 'I' of the narrator usually corresponds to an imagined character. In the case of autobiography, it corresponds to the author of the narrative. Autofiction, instead, "has logic of its own, and uses autobiographical experience consciously, explicitly and sometimes deceptively" (ALBERCA 1996: 11). In a blog the 'I' is usually thought to correspond to a character that exists in real life, a character, however, who also interacts with the readers in the comment section, and yet fictionalizes his or her identity in several ways. In the following I will show some of the narrative strategies used by the bloggers that contribute to the blurring of the identity of the author/main character.

Pseudonyms

One way of fictionalizing one's identity in a blog is to adopt a pseudonym. In Egypt, this was very common, especially in 2005 when the blogging community was still emerging. For many of the bloggers I interviewed, using a nickname was a way of playing with the medium, of trying out a new personality while accessing a different social setting, and not really a means of maintaining personal security, as is often believed.

The playful attitude is evidenced by the fact that most of the nicknames match the idea expressed in the title of the respective blogs. Thus, Ġādah ʿAbd al-ʿĀl, the title of whose blog claims ʿĀyza ʾatgawwiz (Eg. Ar., I Want to Get Married), accordingly signs her posts as "Brāyd" (Bride). Similarly, Riḥāb Bassām introduces herself as "Ḥaddūtah": as the blog is entitled Ḥawādīt (Stories/Tales), she herself becomes one of these stories—probably even the main story, as the blog is mainly about her personal life. Pseudonyms are often chosen to actualize some of the psychological traits the writer cannot express anywhere else, and may thus express considerable meaning. Adopting a pseudonym may therefore signal that one is entering a distinct universe in which different rules apply and where one's personality may develop to the full (SERFATY 2004: 93). For example, ʾAḥmad NĀǦĪ has chosen the devil as his online counterpart, as evidenced by his pseudonym "Eblis"12 (Devil). He clarifies that the choice of this name is meant to highlight his difference from and opposition to his social community. Indeed, according to the Qur'ān, ʾIblīs was the only angel of God to refuse to bow to Adam.13 Interestingly, readers often use pseudonyms as well. Thus, bloggers create themselves as central characters

in a fictional theater, populated by a large supporting cast of minor characters and readers (SORAPURE 2003: 13).

According to GENETTE, "the use of pseudonyms unites a taste for masks and mirrors, for indirect exhibitionism, and for controlled histrionics with delight in invention, in borrowing, in verbal transformation, in onomastic fetishism" (1997: 54). In his famous study Voyeur Nation, media scholar C. CALVERT argues that, on the Internet or on TV, the corollary of exhibitionism is voyeurism, which he defines as "the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently revealed and unguarded lives, often simply for purposes of entertainment" (2000: 2). In fact, we can see that when the entries are signed with a pseudonym, readers tend to read more actively to discover who is the person hiding behind the false name and then eventually tell it to the others. In order to do so, they might navigate the blog looking for further markers of the author's identity or do some investigating in real life. This is evidenced by the words written by the blogger Nirmīn Nizār:

> I opened this blog as a space for chatting without restrictions or fear. I wanted to hide behind a different name; although I knew that many people who know me in real life could easily guess it was me. But my dear friend decided to remove the curtain and reveal my identity to the world. This is not a farewell, not an excuse for leaving; it's just another nonsense talk.[14]

Self-Conscious Narrators Another device often used to blur the line between the author and the main character in the narrative is the author's use of him- or herself as a self-conscious/metafictional narrator. Thus, while telling an intimate, confessional account, the authorial voice intrudes into the narrative and questions its authenticity, breaking the verisimilitude of the work. For example, Maḥmūd Ḥasan, author of the blog Ṣaḫābīt (Scribbles), inserts a disclaimer for the readers at the beginning or end of several posts:

> (ملحوظة لسيئي النية) البوست ليس له اي علاقة شخصية بصاحب المدونة ، وليس له علاقة من قريب او بعيد بحياته الشخصية ، تحياتي
>
> (Note for those with bad intentions) There is no personal relationship between this post and the author of this blog, nor is there a relationship, be it far or close, with his personal life. My greetings. (Mirsāl, 6 December 2008)

This technique can often be found in autofictional novels. E. H. JONES believes it may have the opposite effect of enhancing the reader's belief (2009: 180). It may also, however, increase the reader's confusion regarding the 'truthfulness' of the blog. Some readers do indeed inquire about the

factual nature of the account by asking the writers directly, as in the following:

- انت متأكد ان ديه قصه انت مألفها . مش عارف ليه مش مصدق
- مش معىن إن صيغة القصة بالأنا تبقى لازم بتاعتي أنا ، فهمت يا ابو بق واسع ؟؟؟

وحتى لو حكايتي ، إيه يعني يا اخي كبير علي إني احب واتحب واتقلب واتباع وانخدع ، عادي يعني

> KIMOOZ: Are you sure this is a fictional story? I don't know why, I can't believe it.
>
> MAḤMŪD: Why does every story written in the first person have to be autobiographical, O wide-mouthed one? And even if it is about me, what is the problem in that I love, I am loved; I am tossed around, sold out and cheated?
>
> (*ʾAsʾilah*, 6 June 2008)

Other readers enjoy it as a fictional story and point out that the story addresses their feelings and fosters identification. Resorting to a self-conscious narrator might be a way of protecting one's social respectability while revealing aspects of one's self. But more significantly, it might signal that by presenting it as fiction, by temporarily removing themselves from the story, the authors aim to generalize, objectivize their feelings: their story becomes a story with which any young Egyptian may identify, and this is also one of the tasks generally attributed to literature and *ʾadab*.

Hoaxes (*Ištiġālāt*)

Bloggers also tickle the readers in a game that they call ištiġālah, an expression in Egyptian vernacular that could be translated as 'hoax'. It consists of deliberately fabricating fictional stories and presenting them as truth by using an intimate, confessional tone of narration, with a call for readers' support.15

An example of this 'game' can be found in a blog post written by Nāǧī, Li-kulli ʾawwal bidāyah, li-kulli ʾāḫir nihāyah (In Every First There Is a Beginning, in Every Last There Is an End; 6 August 2005). On the day this blog is written the narrator announces to his audience that on waking up one morning he realized that he had lost his sight. Dictating to his sister, he announces the news to his readers and asks them whether they could advise him where to get a keyboard with Braille fonts.

Indeed, several readers seem deceived by the medium and assume that what Nāǧī writes is true.16 They ask how this could have happened and wish him

a quick recovery. Others seem to understand the game and participate in it according to its rules:

> ماشوفتش الراجل بتاع كفكا اللي صحى لقى نفسه صرصار؟ على الأقل أنت أهلك لسه حواليك ، التاني سابوه يعفن
>
> SPRING: Look at the Kafka man, he woke up and found himself a beetle! At least you still have your family; the other one was left to get rotten! (24 December 2005) After several comments the blogger reveals that this post is an "unrestrained excess of imagination, an extravagant fantasy" (šaṭḥ ẖayāl). In response, a reader writes:
>
> طيب ابقى سيب تنويه يا أخي انه خيال .. فرضا دخل واحد زيي عنده عطب في جهاز التفريق بين الحدث المتخيل والحدث الحقيقي
>
> GUEVARA: Put a note saying that this is fiction, do you think we have a machine to distinguish fiction from reality? (24 December 2005)

Another reader writes: "You made me feel stupid, as usual!"17 Thus, in this post the blogger achieves his goal of using the Internet medium to write a literary text that makes the readers uncomfortable. The literary text turns into an interactive game, a joke almost, played by readers and writers.

Once the readers realize that the story is fictional, they understand that it is meant to express feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. By presenting himself as blind, the character expresses his incapacity for seeing and understanding reality. In addition, writing about blindness is also a way of writing about the act of writing itself. "My sister is typing, and I am insisting that she should put some diacritic signs (ʿilāmat al-taškīl) […], I tell her that they give beauty to the text […] she types and I don't know how many typos she has made". By pretending to be blind and therefore diverting the blame for these mistakes towards his sister, he mocks the strict adherence to language rules on which Arab literati usually insist.

The narrative strategies described so far (pseudonyms, self-conscious narrator, hoaxes) show that the bloggers inject their writing with their personal subjectivity, but they blur their identity in order to involve the readers in an active game of interpretation. In addition, we must notice that the blog changes the way of writing and reading, because of its multimedial nature and its non-linear, open-ended structure. Therefore it demands that the reader choose his/her own way of reading and making sense of the text

Multimedia Open Texts

In the autofictional blog, as in other forms of electronic literature, writers combine written texts with elements drawn from other media, such as visuals and audio.

Often writers insert personal pictures into the narrative. They help to assure not only the readers but also the writers of the reality of their existence. It must be kept in mind, though, that these pictures could easily be fabricated. Apart from personal pictures, blog entries may also include drawings, pictures of contemporary art, and other sorts of images. Pictures contribute to the meaning of the text, or help set the mood for the story.

For example, the blogger Munà SAYF began to experiment with drawings when she started blogging, in order to make her blog more personal and original. Thus, many of her blog posts combine text with very simple drawings.

In several other entries Munà depicts herself as a small child, both visually and verbally. For her, taking refuge in an imaginary childhood is a means of ignoring, or forgetting, a reality marked by the cruelty of the political regime. In fact, as she writes in the post "Ḫāyfa" (Scared; 4 May 2007), "I am scared, and the more fear clinches into me, the more childish I become". Munà's self-depiction of childish instinct is neatly juxtaposed with the description of a more mature, rebellious, passionate woman. In these entries she displays her hair as long, curly, and loose. Here the hair emphasizes the feminine and rebellious side of her personality, the longing for freedom instead of imprisonment and unfolding femininity

Similarly, the outline of the blog The Red Sofa reveals Bilāl's passion for visual arts. Both in the header of the blog and in the right-hand margin, Bilāl uploads pictures of Jennifer Garant's paintings showing whimsical chefs riding bikes and mopeds and carrying food and wine. The profile picture also depicts a chubby chef clumsily serving two bottles of wine. By choosing this picture, the blogger is highlighting the corpulence of his body, which is also depicted in his writing. Additionally, he informs his audience of the possibility that his blog may contain some elements considered ḥarām (forbidden by Islamic law) by more conservative readers. To more liberal readers, however, the illustrations can be seen as an invitation to fill a glass, sit on his red sofa, and enjoy his stories

Readers may also have a say in the visual aspect of the blog. In The Red Sofa, some commentators complain about the color of the font chosen by Bilāl and advise him to choose a different color:

والّله يا أستاز كنبة أسلوبك فى الكتابة زريف وغريب بس ياريت لو
مافيهاش رزالة تكبر الفونت وتخلى الباج جراوند أفتح

> Really, Prof. Sofa, your writing style is nice [zarīf] and strange, but if it is not a hassle, could you increase the font size and make the background [albāg grāwnd] lighter? (3 July 2007).

Authors also combine texts with audio or video elements. Entries on the ʿArabiyyat al-fūl blog, for example, always include a song. The author explains that the song is usually one that he was listening to while writing the associated post. It is meant to reproduce the writer's mood during the post's composition, and to put the readers in the same atmosphere. Often authors include music videos from YouTube.

The combination of these media transforms reading into a multi-sensorial experience. It also requires the reader to make an effort to interpret the text: he or she has to make sense of different semiotic resources. The meaning of the text stems or emerges from the combination of audio, video, and visual elements (SERFATY 2004: 27).

Furthermore, this hybridization of the text by mixing written words with other media prevents the construction of a unified linear account while creating new meaning and opening up new spaces for interpretation (SERFATY 2004: 29). This disruption of the linearity is also obtained via the embedding of links into the narrative, which I will analyze in the next paragraph.

Links

While printed literary texts are usually enclosed between the covers of a book, online narratives are structured as a database, described by POSTER as "an engine for producing retrievable identities" (1995: 89). In this way, the database produces identities that can be dispersed across numerous sites, but pulled together through whatever particular filter or search function is in operation at the time.

Even though the simultaneous appearance of the bits of information on a website produces a certain unity, the narrative is expanded through links. For example, in the blogroll, we find a list of links to blogs or websites the author reads frequently. This list of links is an important part of the blogger's self-representation because it conveys a picture of the blogger's cultural, aesthetic, and social affinities, and thus his or her identity. Links also add to the reader's sense of the blog's "authenticity" because the narrative is anchored in real places and features people whom members of the audience may also recognize, making them feel part of the narrative (MCNEILL 2003: 33). Links are also inserted into the main text and expand the narration outside the blog space. A common practice that I found in Egyptian blogs is to insert a link to another blogger's online diary whenever he or she is mentioned in the narration. In this way the author gives the

reader the chance to gain a greater understanding of the characters through their blogs.

This space distribution opens the way for a random exploration instead of one specific way of reading; thus readers have to find their way through the different paths to which hyperlinks lead. HIMMER (2004) argues that the term 'ergodic literature,' as coined and defined by E. AARSETH in his famous book Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature, may well be applied to blogs. Ergodic literature—AARSETH derives the term from the Greek words for 'work' and 'path' (érgon and hódos, respectively)—is a type of literature that requires significant effort on the part of the reader in the construction of the text.[18] In other words, the reader can open and begin reading the weblog at any point along the process of its production from the oldest, earliest post to the most current. A reader can use an internal search mechanism (common on many weblogs) to seek particular topics or terms or browse by category, month, or day, all of which offer myriad paths through the narrative "space" of the weblog, or to other weblogs, articles, or general websites (HIMMER 2004). In this sense, the reader's pleasure is equivalent to that of exploring a labyrinth, a game, or an imaginary world in which he can get lost, discover secret paths, and play around.

Ongoing Narrations

The spatial distribution of the narrative runs parallel to its temporal distribution. A defining quality of a blog is its dynamic updating within a dated entry format.

FITZPATRICK argues that like any work of literature the blog has a plot. However, this plot is not planned beforehand but it is constituted by the accumulation of the posts published regularly on the blog (2007: 168). Each post makes sense in itself, but read together, the multiple entries compose a larger story. Blogs are not merely a way of writing the self, they are "a continuous way of writing oneself" (MORTENSEN &WALKER 2002: 258; emphasis added), they are "published bit by bit; they are always in progress, always becoming" (2002: 267). Thus also the author/main character's identity is never fixed; rather, it is a dynamic identity, which changes over time.

This refusal of closure, this interruption, deferral, and waiting, produces in the readers the desire to return to the blog site and therefore brings it close to earlier narrative forms such as the epistolary novel, but also the soap opera (FITZPATRICK 2007: 174). In fact, the novel reader's or soap opera watcher's desire to reach the end may be compared to the blog reader's waiting for the next blog entry. Sometimes the blogger also inserts cliffhangers to make the narration more compelling. 19 However, while novelistic forms and the soap opera do have ends, most diaries don't. Some

bloggers in my research sample have stopped blogging, but without giving a definite end to the narrative. They have simply stopped writing. They might come back at any time, and the simple fact that the blog is still online gives the reader hope that they will.

In addition, in the blog the plot is not driven exclusively by the author. Readers can also contribute to the plot's development.

In many cases, the readers go to the comment section to congratulate the bloggers on their writing style or to describe the feelings provoked by their reading. Often readers add personal anecdotes to the story.

Readers may also provide a sudden twist to the narration, by changing the direction of the plot. This is evidenced in *The Red Sofa*, in which the blogger tells the story of his daily life on the sofa that he has inherited from his mother, who died shortly before. One day one reader suggests auctioning off the sofa. This leads to an unexpected development of the narrative. As a consequence, the blogger decides to write an imagined version of the story of the sofa, in order to attract more readers to the auction. In this account, the sofa is turned almost into a human being that could be seen as the author's fictional alter ego. This example shows that a reader may provide creative ideas to the writers. The writers, in turn, may incorporate and develop them in the literary text.

Mixed Arabic as a Literary Language

My last point concerns the stylistic choices made by bloggers. Since blogs are interactive, they are seen not only as a platform for writing but also as a means to communicate with the readers. In addition, blogs are self-published; therefore they do not undergo the scrutiny of editors or publishers who, as mentioned above, tend to expect works of literature to be written in a high variety of language, i.e., Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This allows an unrestrained freedom to make stylistic choices.

Autofictional bloggers have a distinct voice that elevates the style of the blog to the level of literariness. Their language is emotional and is also embellished with metaphor and alliteration. Dialogue is also rendered as direct speech to attribute more literariness to the text. However, bloggers forge this language by mixing MSA, the formal variety of Arabic, together with vernacular, youth slang, and English. Mixed together, these different language varieties create an original style that raises the language of blogging above the ordinary and makes it literary. We can also notice a playful spelling, with excessive lengthening of vowels to imitate the accentuated pronunciation of the words. Short sentences are often combined with very long passages, but also ellipses are heavily used; taken together, these may indicate the flow of thoughts, indeterminacy, pauses, or hesitation characteristic of face-to-face conversation

It is also rather common to find mistakes and misspelling of works that are left intact by the bloggers to give more immediacy and spontaneity to the work.

In modern Arabic literature, the use of this language in literary works is an innovation brought about by blogging.20 Readers often point out in the comment section that they enjoy this style as it speaks directly to their heart. This language expresses the creative needs of a young, globalized, tech-savvy generation. On the other hand, one may find that sometimes readers contest it and reproach the writers for the shortcomings of their writing and their lack of mastery of literary language. In fact, they do not hesitate to point out linguistic and typographical errors within the text, as in these cases:

> نفسي بس لو تنصب المفعول واسم إن وخبر كان، لو ده حصل هتبقى كاتب عظيم
>
> I would just like you to put the manṣūb endings to direct objects, the subject of ʾinna and the predicate of kāna; if that happened, you would be a great writer. (24 December 2005)

This is another example of how the readers challenge the authority of the writer. The writer is not seen as the master of the text whose form cannot be questioned, but as the author of a text that can be constantly changed thanks to the collaboration of readers and writer. Apart from that, it shows that readers take over the job of editors and proofreaders, as they cooperate with the writer in the attempt to ameliorate the literary text. In addition, the informal tone of these comments suggests that in the blogosphere the author and the reader are equals.

Conclusions

In this paper I have focused on the unique features presented by the autofictional blog, resulting from the adoption of the Internet medium. In the analysis of these features, I have focused on the reader's involvement as a way to understand the specific literary quality of the blog. I have argued that by carrying a useful message that the readers have to interpret by themselves and that they can contribute to shaping, the autofictional blog acquires features of traditional *ʾadab*. First, readers are called to discover the identity behind the screen, making sense of pseudonyms, self-conscious narration, and hoaxes and gathering fragments of the author's real identity scattered through the blog. Second, readers have to make their own way through the labyrinth of the open, multimedia text, by reading text together with pictures, selecting links and browsing different pages, playing music and videos. Third, readers are invited to return to the narration, as the blog is continuously updated; new pieces are added to the main story over time. Readers can continuously interact with and contribute to the plot of the blog

by adding their own stories in the comment section. They can also have a say in the visual layout of the blog and the stylistic features of the narrative.

In short, it can be seen that the blog presents some elements of literariness (in the western sense), such as fictionality, personal subjectivity, plot, and literary language, but that it also carries on features of traditional ʾ*adab* (as developed from classical ʾ*adab* since the 19th century nahḍah). Moreover, I have also shown how the blog complicates the understanding of both, ʾ*adab* and literature (in the western sense) alike, in several ways: the literary is mixed with the non-literary, the plot is fragmented and always in progress, Modern Standard Arabic is mixed with language varieties that are usually not considered "literary" in the Arabic domain.

Autofictional authors activate the readers by disclosing their own life story, expressing intimate feelings and emotions. They invite readers to change the reality of the text by pushing a button, by clicking and navigating from one link to another, and by posting their own stories in the comment section. It is from this interaction that new communities of authors and readers emerge. Within these communities, new values, stories, and subjectivities are being played out, discussed, and validated.

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© Teresa Pepe, University of Oslo, Norway

► teresa.pepe@ikos.uio.no

* This article is a slightly reworked version of a public lecture given at the University of Oslo, Norway, on 13 June, 2014, as "Life-writing on the Net: Hybrid Genre and Blurred Identities. How Does the Autofictional Blog Transform Our Understanding of Literature"?

1. A weblog may be defined as a "frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order" (WALKER 2005)

2. In 2005, the Egyptian government improved Internet infrastructure and reduced the prices for Internet access. For a historical account of the Egyptian blogosphere, see RADSCH 2008 and NĀǦĪ 2010. 3 Until 2011 very few incidents took place, which have given rise to worries concerning freedom of expression online, such as the arrest and sentencing of the blogger Karīm ʿĀmir to four years in prison for insulting religion and the state in 2007. (See , last accessed 10/03/2014.) Worthy of attention is the fact that the Internet, together with mobile phone lines, was shut down on 28 January, the third day of the January 2011 uprisings. A recent report by Amnesty International (June 2014) warns that the government headed by ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī is planning to introduce a new system to carry out indiscriminate mass surveillance of social media in Egypt. See , last accessed 10 March, 2014.

4 On the role of Internet technologies in the Egyptian uprisings see FARIS 2013.

5 In 2008, three Egyptian blogs written by three women bloggers were published by Dār al-Šurūq, the biggest private Egyptian publishing house, and could be found on the best-seller lists of Cairo bookshops. In the following years, many more blogs have been turned into print. For more on Egyptian blog-books see PEPE 2011.

6 I coined this term to describe some personal blogs dealing mainly with the authors' lives and presenting some elements of literariness. 'Autofiction' denotes a postmodern form of literary autobiography. It is usually used to describe a novel in which the author is also the narrator and main character in the story, as in autobiographies. For a more theoretical explanation of "autofiction" see JONES 2009. On the application of the term 'autofiction' to Egyptian blogs see PEPE 2012.

7 The origin of the word is probaby in the plural *ʾādāb* with metathesis from *ʾadʿāb*, sing. daʿb, which means "norms and customs, tradition", so the word *ʾadab* coincided largely with the word sunna, which in Islamic times came to signify the tradition and customs of the Prophet. After the spread of Islam, as the sunna started to be used exclusively to indicate the norms of the Prophet, *ʾadab* acquired a different meaning; it meant both moral education, the corpus of good norms, and the sum of all non-religious knowledge. Thus, the main purpose of *ʾadab* was "to discipline the mind and to teach, educate". For a further discussion about the word *ʾadab* see the etymological-conceptual study "Politeness, Höflichkeit, *ʾadab*" by S. GUTH (2010).

8 Andreas PFLITSCH writes that since 1947, when Ṭāhā ḤUSAYN adopted the expression *littérature engagée* (engaged literature) from Jean-Paul SARTRE and introduced it into the Arabic intellectual debate, the main issues of discussion have been the means of this commitment. In his words: "at issue was not whether literature should be committed to social and political causes but how it was to undertake this mission" (PFLITSCH 2010: 29). PFLITSCH argues that, generally, this has remained the case until the time of his own writing (2010). For a discussion of the notion of iltizām (engagement) see KLEMM 2000.

9 The term is obviously a calque (loan translation), coined after English blog, a truncation of (web) log. Log is used here in the sense of logbook, originally a nautical term that by extension came to signify 'a book in which events are recorded; a journal, especially of travel' (Wiktionary, s.v. logbook).

10 This is evidenced by my interviews with the authors. For my research I interviewed 30 Egyptian bloggers in Cairo and Alexandria, in 2011 and 2012.

11 For the main traits of this "artistic sensibility" see GUTH 2011 and KENDALL 2006.

12 Transcription of the Arabic word ʾiblīs as used by the blogger himself.

13 "Who created you, We gave you form and then We told the angels: 'Bow Down before Adam.' They bowed, all except Satan, who was not among those who bowed. He said: 'What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you?' He said: 'I am better than he: You created me of fire, but him You created out of clay.'" Qurʾān, The Battlements, 7, 11–18, transl. by Tarif Khalidi, Penguin, London, 2008, p. 118. This is also a common phenomenon in Sufism, where Iblīs often becomes a figure of identification for the Sufi (as against the 'orthodox' tradition), cf. art. "Iblīs" in Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition.

14 The quotation is taken from the book retrieved from her blog, Iskandariyyah / Bayrūt (Alexandria Beirut), Dār al-Šurūq, Cairo, 2008, p. 64. My translation.

15 Jill Walker illustrates many cases of "blog hoaxes" in her book Blogging. See the chapter "Fictions or Hoaxes?", 2008: 121–126.

16 Lilith 12/24 10:39

إن شاء اللّه لن يطول الأمر عليك [...] ابقي طمنا الدكتور قال ايه بعد ما ترجع اجمد يا باشا

... Zaytuna Sha 12/24 00:46

ابليس ارجوك وضح ، انا ىف صدمة من امبارح ؟ و مش عارفة اكتب ايه

17 كالعاده .عبيطه اني أحس خللتني

18 AARSETH positions in this category both print and digital literature, thus including not only hypertexts but also classic texts as the I Ching and Raymond QUENEAU’s One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems.

19 An example of that can be found in the blog al-Kanabah al-Hamra by Bilāl ḤUSNĪ. He concludes one Follow ”تابعوني الكنبه الحمرا جنب المرتبه الاورنج / الولاد بتنام على ضهرهم :writing), 2007 January 6 (posts his of me, the red sofa beside the orange mattress / the lazy guys (lit. who sleep in supine position)”.

20 Research in the history of Arabic has shown that mixed varieties that combine standard and colloquial features with others of a third type, neither standard nor colloquial, have been in use since early times (called “Middle Arabic”); here, authors would write in MA because they found it appropriate, usually in less formal genres or sometimes simply because they were not fluent in Classical Arabic. However, since the 19th century, during the period of cultural reform that is known by the term Nahḍah (Renaissance), Arab literati have stressed the need to preserve the beauty and purity of fuṣḥā by using a modern version of it, linked to the historical tradition and intellectual splendor of Ancient times, which could be used at the same time as a Pan-Arab national language and to address the entire Arab nation. See the entry “Middle Arabic” (Jérôme Lentin) in the Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics, , accessed 11 October 2013, 235. – It is noteworthy that the blogs published in print underwent very little stylistic editing, leaving the immediacy and spontaneity of this writing untouched.

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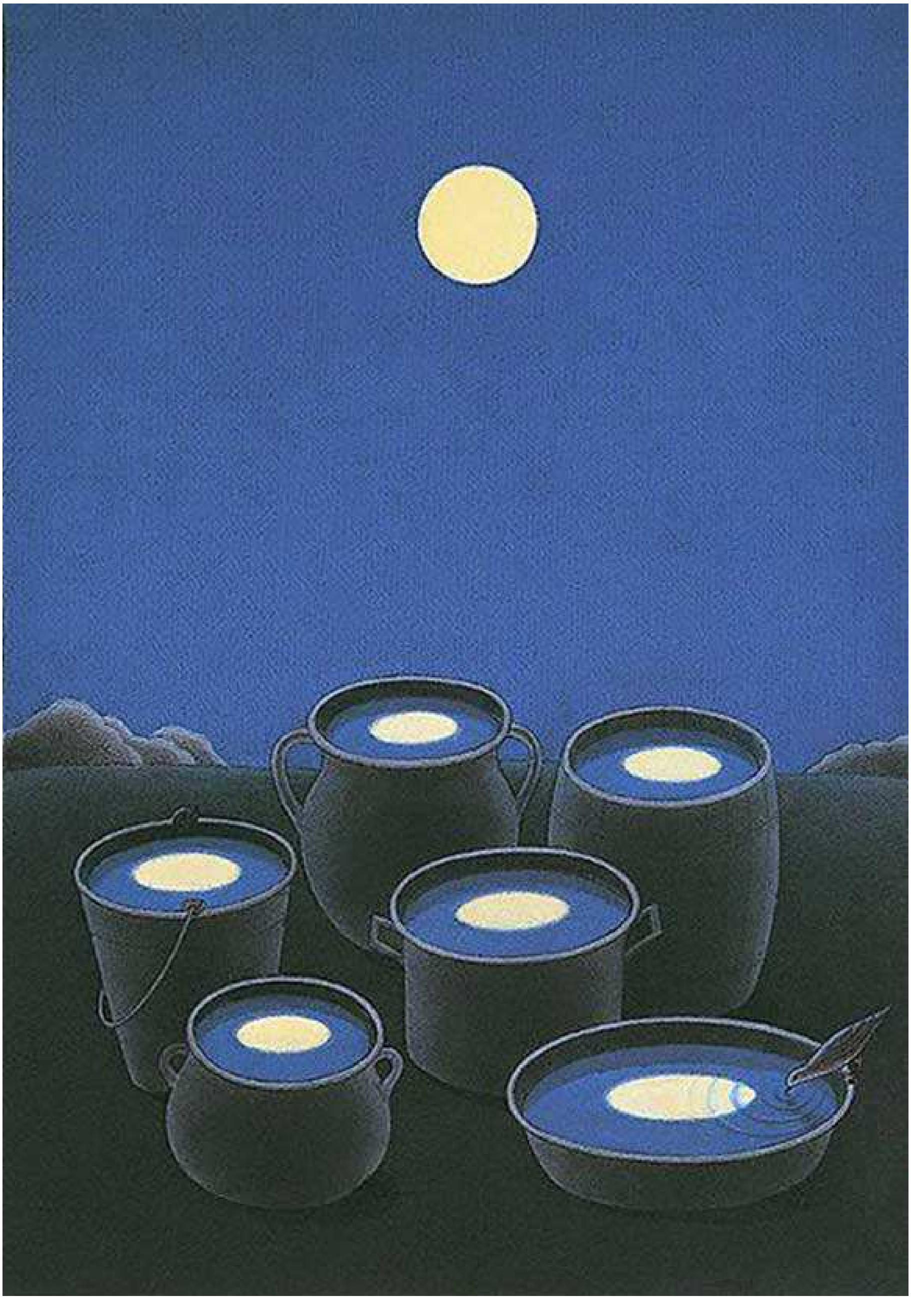
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Gurbuz Dogan Eksioglu - Turkey



Interview with

Małgorzata Różańska

Cultural Manager - Villa Decius Association

Małgorzata Różańska is a cultural manager, project coordinator, freelance translator and Ph.D. Candidate at the Jagiellonian University in Poland. She studied German Philology at the Jagiellonian University and Applied Linguistics at the Tischner European University in Krakow/Poland. Since 2008 she is the manager of the Literature Office and coordinator of international literary programs at the Villa Decius Association in Krakow, coordinator of residential stays of approx. 150 writers, translators and artists from over 20 countries. Różańska is fellow of the Polish Minister of Culture 2014 and CEC Artslink Fellow 2015, and co-founder and editorial assistant of RADAR magazine.

Villa Decius is a historical legacy, how did it turn to be a cultural institution?

Yes indeed, the Villa Decius is a cultural heritage place from the 16th century, which nowadays keeps continuing its primary mission as a cultural, artistic and scientific contact point. Throughout the centuries the Villa belonged to several noble Polish families starting from the Decius family, through the Lubomirski, Sanguszko, Wielowiejski up to the Czartoryski family, and was then serving as army quarters, tenement building, police headquarters, boarding school and a tuberculosis ward. In 1995 the Villa Decius Association was established by well-known representatives of the worlds of science, economy and culture and within several years it became a cultural institution of international outreach bridging European nations and providing a venue for the dialogue of cultures.

What are the main activities of The Villa?

At the heart of all the programmes of the Association lies the idea of meetings of representatives of various fields of science and culture, various nationalities and areas of interest; the idea of exchanging thoughts, and the promotion of pluralism and tolerance in public life. As a continuator of the ideas and activity of its founder and patron Justus Ludwik Decjusz, the Villa Decius Association creates a forum for exchanging thoughts and a space for searching for mutual inspirations for creative work. In the implementation of its programmes, it cooperates with national and international institutions that aim at developing vital values existing in regional cultures, supporting the processes of European integration, and propagating the humanist heritage of European civilisation.

Is Villa Decius Association a governmental project or is it carried out by Polish intellectuals?

The Villa Decius Association is a non-governmental institution established by well-known representatives of the worlds of science, economy and culture.

What is the relationship between The Villa and the other intellectual and cultural associations and organization such as ICORN and SAR?

The Villa Decius Association is cooperating with diverse international organisations, among them ICORN and SAR. In the case of ICORN, the Villa Decius is the Operator of the ICORN program in Krakow, which means that it is responsible for the everyday implementation of the program.

Do you offer a residence for writers, poets and artists over the year?

Yes, we are running artist-in-residence programs for almost 20 years right now. We have hosted over 300 writers, translators, journalists, playwrights, etc. from more than 30 countries within the framework of approx. 10 residency programs.

What is the number of guests in the Villa?

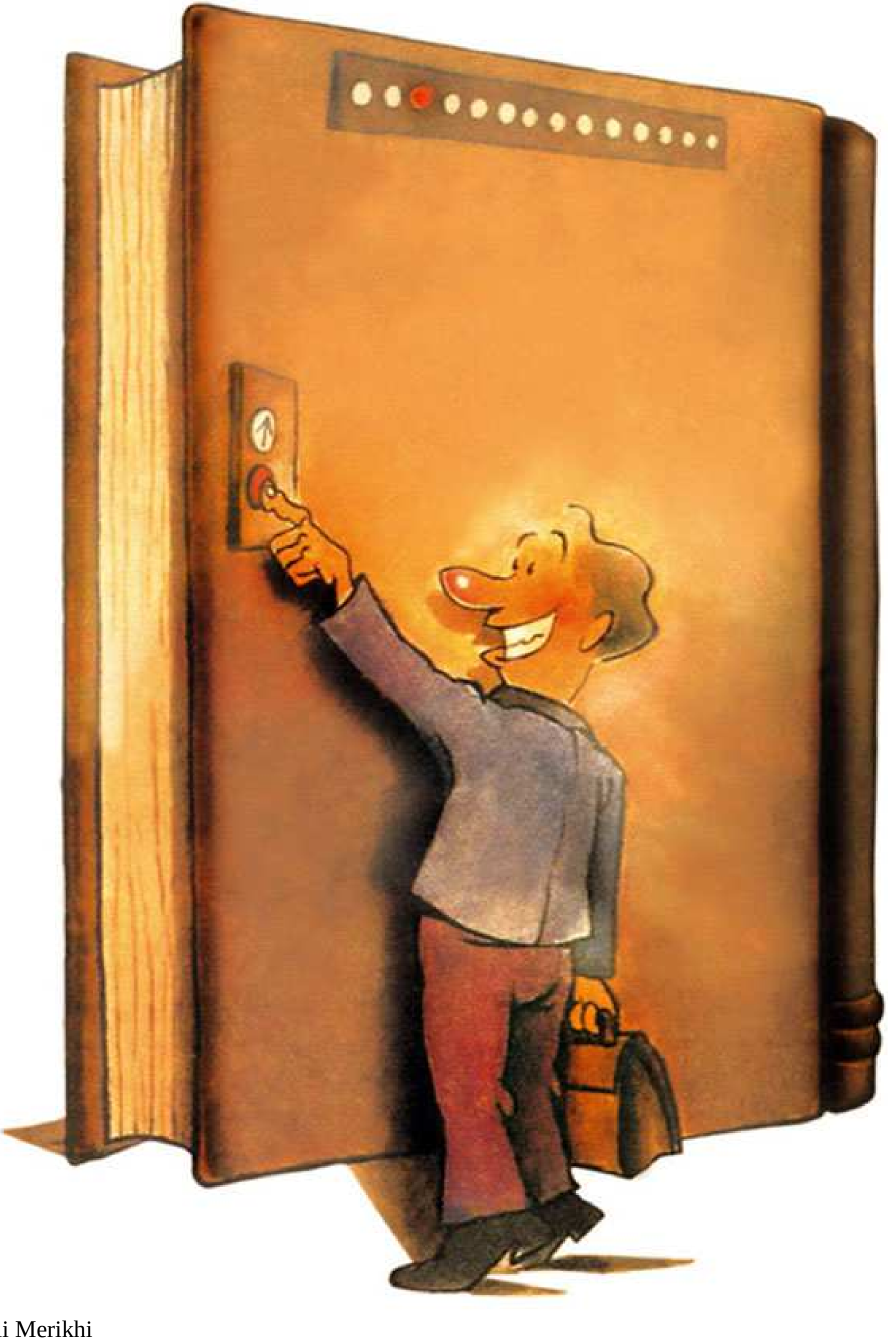
We can host 7 artists in residence at the same time.

Are the guests from different continents?

Yes – we hosted guests from all the continents.

What about the Association program next year?

We are planning to continue most of our currently running programms, especially artist-in-residence programms such as ICORN, but as we are a non-governmental institution we are project funded and rely on grants. So our programming depends much on the funding that we can get for our programs. In order to be up-to-date with what is and will be happening at the Villa Decius, do please visit our website: www.villa.org.pl .



Ali Merikhi